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Check it out! Video games, homework-help centers draw teens to the library

By Stephanie Dunnwind
Seattle Times staff reporter

Every Monday afternoon, as many as 80 teens converge on Tukwila's Foster Library, one of 22 King County Library System branches that transform meeting rooms into arcades with Xbox 360, PlayStation 2 and GameCube stations.

With its Game On! events, a new MySpace page and manga clubs, King County is venturing out of traditional library mode and into teen territory.

"To be relevant to teens, we need to meet them on their own terms," said Barbara Carmody, KCLS' education and teen-services coordinator.

Reaching out to teens is part of a national trend that will be explored at the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting, which will bring more than 10,000 librarians and publishers to Seattle this weekend. The conference includes workshops on podcasts, gaming and building online teen communities.

"A few teens say, 'Hey, old people are trying to horn in on our space,' " said Linda Braun, a conference presenter and New York City-based educational technology consultant. "But most of the feedback is positive. They're so surprised libraries are doing this. It's, 'Wow, that's great you're coming to us and using something we're interested in.' "

Even as libraries target teens online, many also serve as ad hoc teen centers. With homework help centers and computers, they're a popular hangout spot.

"I go here basically every day," said Adam Bertolacci, 17, during a break from playing "Burnout" at the monthly gaming event hosted by KCLS' Kingsgate Library in Kirkland. "There's just a whole bunch of things to do that I wouldn't be able to do at home. I go on the computer, I read, I talk with friends."



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Immersed in digital entertainment at the Kingsgate Library, teens Aja Chinnell, 13; Andres Lorenzo, 13; and Lawrance Lorenzo, 15, take part in a drop-in "Game On!" program of the King County Library System.



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Andres Lorenzo, 13, and his brother Lawrance, 15, play "Dance Dance Revolution Extreme 2" at the Kingsgate Library during one of its "Game On!" events.

While libraries have long offered young-adult literature, programs specifically targeting teens are relatively new. "Teens are historically underserved in libraries," said Beth Gallaway, a Massachusetts-based online trainer and former librarian. "It can be hard to find a place they fit. But the numbers of them are only growing."

Aja Chinnell, 13, grew up attending Kingsgate Library's storytimes and now has missed only one of its teen gaming events. Her favorite game is "Guitar Hero II," which allows players to choose a character, guitar and songs to perform in a band. "It's cool to just rock out," said Chinnell, who also comes to do homework after school.

The new narrative

"Gaming has been by far the most popular program we've ever done," said Summer Hayes, teen-services librarian for KCLS' Foster, Skyway and Tukwila branches. "This is stuff they have at home, but they still come. It's definitely for the social interaction."

The library system tries to meet teens' requests, but requires games to be multiplayer and rated for teens or younger. Though some dismiss video games as fluffy at best and violent at worst, Gallaway says they're simply a new format, on par with libraries' popular movie and music collections. "Libraries are also about entertainment," she said. "Games have story, plot and setting in them. The advantage is, they're interactive."

"Video games are the new narrative," agreed Chance Hunt, manager of youth services for Seattle Public Library. "Kids are thinking in new ways."

Adults sometimes impose a double standard on their children and teens, expecting the kids to read "educational" literature while they check out a stack of Danielle Steel books, said Judy Nelson, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association.

Most librarians want to engage teens, not judge their choices. "If we're not understanding and knowing what teens are doing, then they'll find someone who does," said Nelson, youth-services coordinator for the Pierce County Library System. "We want to get materials into the hands of all youth in the formats they like." She cites librarians' embrace of manga (Japanese comics) and anime. "Graphic novels are one of the hottest ways teens read for pleasure," she said.

However, even some fans of teen services aren't convinced video games fit libraries' literacy goals. Gaming events might draw big crowds, but "numbers alone do not justify a program," said teen-services librarian Rosalie Olds, whose own sons play "tons" of video games — at home. "The question is, what do we stand for as a library? What are we doing for the people who come to it?"

At King County's Fairwood Library, Olds prefers print programs, such as book clubs, writing workshops and poetry slams.

"You're interacting with them and listening to them, and they're interacting with each other," she said. "Teens sitting around a table talking about why a book is meaningful to them seems so much more powerful than two teens holding controllers and racing each other."

Gallaway, an ALA presenter at the "Building Teen Communities Online" workshop, advocates a mix of tech and face-to-face programs. When she worked as a librarian, budget cuts forced her to cancel a teen

book club. She tried moving it online with a blog instead, but that eliminated the socializing opportunities. "The whole thing fizzled out," she said. "They loved meeting together so much."

Nowhere to go —

but the library

Foster Library, close to a high school and a middle school, functions as a library-cum-community-center after school.

"A lot of kids have nowhere to go and nothing to do," Hayes said. On one early-release school day, the library attracted some 300 students. "It was completely out of control," she admits. The library now adds extra staff on those days; a school principal and security guards also help.

Besides using the computers, teens check out books and access the library's homework resources. The gaming events cause few problems. "They realize it's a sweet deal for them, and they don't want to mess it up," Hayes noted.

Rather than discourage teens in general, librarians try to target the ones breaking rules or bothering other patrons. "Teens do hang out in groups, so sometimes they seem more disruptive than a 3-year-old yelling," Carmody said. "But we're definitely sensitive to the fact they have every right to be there."

Fun gaming events help library staff get to know teens in an informal setting. "That way, if you see them in the library and they're starting to get too loud or they're sitting on tables, you have a connection already," Carmody explained. "Even knowing their names makes a big difference. You can say, 'Hey, c'mon,' and they don't see you as someone who is always telling them what to do."

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