

Chapter 13

Egaming and Girls: Optimizing Use in School Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Schools and libraries are considering the incorporation of egaming because of its attraction to youth and its potential benefit for instruction, developing information literacy skills and facilitating academic success. Although egames are played by most youth, egaming has gender-linked properties: extent of play, choice of games, social interaction in gaming (such as role-playing games), and novice gaming practice. School libraries are uniquely positioned to provide resources and services to insure gender-equitable gaming experiences: gaming periodicals, opportunities to select and review games, collaboration with classroom teachers, and single-sex activities. The emerging trends of casual gaming, mobile egaming, and gaming design offer opportunities that can attract girls, which teacher librarians can leverage in their services. Their efforts can also contribute to the larger arena of serious games.

INTRODUCTION

Gaming in school libraries? Be it board games or computer games, such activities have drawn great attention in the professional field. The American Library Association now has a gaming initiative, which incorporates a blog (<http://gaming.ala.org/news/>), sponsors numerous events, and offers grants for libraries to incorporate gaming into public libraries. Where K-12 settings used to ban any games on the

Internet and eschewed collecting game guidebooks, teacher librarians (TL) are now reconsidering their policies, holding gaming tournaments, and locating core gaming collection lists to help them purchase viable titles and even equipment (Nicholson, 2007). Not every school library is jumping on the band wagon, but the library world is certainly talking about gaming

Just a couple of decades ago, these same school libraries were addressing the issues of cardboard games (Levine, 2006). Of particular interest now are egames: video, console, and computer games.

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For this reason, the term “egaming” will be used to differentiate these electronic forms of games from their more traditional print counterparts. While egames technically predated Web 2.0, the convergence of Internet interactivity and increasingly popular MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) has led to an almost inevitable consideration by TLs. Rather than fight the technological flood, TLs are trying to figure out ways to embrace the phenomenon. A certain “cool-ness” factor has played a part in this endeavor to show that school libraries can provide recreational options as well as academic. Some TLs “translate” egaming skills into information literacy skills to help students bridge life at school and at home. Furthermore, as education is increasingly incorporating serious games (that is, games that are not developed with the sole intent of entertainment but also have educational or other communication objectives), TLs have an opportunity to collaborate with classroom teachers to locate and use serious games effectively for academic success. Egames can also serve as a vehicle to promote girls’ interest in technology (AAUW, 2000; National Center for Women and Information Technology and the Girl Scouts of the USA, 2007; Van Eck, 2006).

As TLs try to attract youth to the library, they know that different library activities appeal to different segments of any population, be it calligraphy or video editing or literature circles. One of the main motivations for incorporating egaming into school libraries has been the desire to attract more boys (Nicholson, 2007). While the egaming gender gap has shrunk, egaming still has a male connotation, a fact not lost on females (Heeter, Edigio, Mishra, Winn, & Winn 2009; Krotoski, 2004). At the same time, TLs should consider factors in egaming that repel and attract girls. In that way, TLs can set up the conditions for learning via egames that can address the needs and interests of both sexes, even if those needs and interests differ. In order to do this, however, it is important to understand some of the key gender differences

in game exposure, use, and preferences. We will begin with an overview of some of the research on these differences before moving into a discussion of how libraries might best proceed in setting up egaming affinity spaces and some of the key challenges they will face in doing so.

BACKGROUND

As noted above, egaming includes a variety of digital formats: video, console, portable game devices, cell phone, and computer-based. Additionally, several genres of games exist. In its study of teen gaming, Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) classified fourteen genres that teens play in order of preference: racing, puzzle, sports, action, adventure, rhythm, strategy, simulation, fighting, first-person shooting, role-playing, survival horror, MMOG (massively multiplayer online game), and virtual worlds.

Current Egaming Practice

At this point, egames have substantially penetrated U. S. households. For console games alone, 71% of households with boys or girls owned video consoles, and 80% of households with teenagers owned consoles (Neilsen, 2007). A 2008 Pew Internet study indicated that 93% of teens go online, and 60% of teens own two or more technological gadgets (number one being desktop computers and number two being cell phones).

Egame usage by youth has also grown in the 21st century. Back in 2001, the National Institute on Media and the Family found that practically all children either played egames or knew someone who did. By 2003, two-thirds of college students reported playing egames occasionally or regularly (Jones, 2003). A 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation study showed that 63% of boys and 40% of girls engage with video games each day (especially those between the ages of 8 and 14). By 2008, about a third of the most frequent console gamers

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