

June 25

When ‘Digital Natives’ Go to the Library

College and university librarians got some unconventional advice Saturday: Play more video games.

At a packed session for academic librarians attending the annual meeting of the American Library Association, in Washington, the topic was how to help students who have learned many of their information gathering and analysis skills from video games apply that knowledge in the library. Speakers said that gaming skills are in many ways representative of a broader cultural divide between today’s college students and the librarians who hope to teach them.

In an era when most students would have to go to a museum to see an old-fashioned card catalog, there’s no doubt that libraries have embraced technology. But speakers said that there was a larger split between students — who are “digital natives,” in one popular way of [classifying people based on their experience with technology](#) — and librarians, who are more likely to be “digital immigrants.” They may have learned the language, but it’s a second language.

George M. Needham, vice president for member services of the [Online Computer Library Center](#), stressed that he wasn’t suggesting that college libraries “tear up the stacks to put in arcades,” but that they rethink many assumptions.

“The librarian as information priest is as dead as Elvis,” Needham said. The whole “gestalt” of the academic library has been set up like a church, he said, with various parts of a reading room acting like “the stations of the cross,” all leading up to the “altar of the reference desk,” where “you make supplication and if you are found worthy, you will be helped.”

So if this hierarchical model doesn’t reach today’s students, what will?

James Paul Gee, a linguist who is the Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the author of [Why Video Games Are Good for Your Soul](#), argued that librarians need to adapt their techniques to digital natives. A digital native would never read an instruction manual with a new game before simply trying the game out, Gee said. Similarly, students shouldn’t be expected to read long explanations of tools they may use before they start experimenting with them.

“We should never read before we play,” Gee said.

Likewise, tools students will use should be designed with this in mind, Gee said, just the way video games are designed. With video games, “you can play while you are inept,” he said. There is also an assumption that players of games are rewarded for “exploring,” even if they don’t achieve the goal they have set out to achieve. “Lowered

consequences of failure” is a key value to embrace, he said.

Needham said that in this environment, librarians should focus on “in demand training,” helping students when they hit an obstacle, not before they start. Even then, he said, librarians shouldn’t say that they are providing formal training, but should say things like “let me show you a short cut,” the kind of language students use with one another all the time.

Others of Needham’s suggestions (on which the librarians were taking furious notes):

- Avoid implying to students that there is a single, correct way of doing things.
- Offer online services not just through e-mail, but through instant messaging and text messaging, which many students prefer.
- Hold LAN parties, after hours, in libraries. (These are parties where many people bring their computers to play computer games, especially those involving teams, together.)
- Schedule support services on a 24/7/365 basis, not the hours currently in use at many college libraries, which were “set in 1963.”
- Remember that students are much less sensitive about privacy issues than earlier generations were and are much more likely to share passwords or access to databases.
- Look for ways to involve digital natives in designing library services and even providing them. “Expertise is more important than credentials,” he said, even credentials such as library science degrees.
- Play more video games.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/06/25/games>.