

How literacy plugs into gaming

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Imagine karaoke teaching literacy to teens who rarely open a book. Or the cues and symbols you'd know if you grew up with Mario, cellphones, iPods and the Wii.

Video games and literacy seem like opposite ends of the education spectrum, but a free conference today at Hamilton Public Library plugs them in together.

Year 2 of the Frontier College literacy conference is titled, Literacy Evolving: Teens, The Wired Generation, and runs all day for interested parents or visitors.

A parent herself, community co-ordinator Shannon Stevens of Frontier College hopes to educate on how the Nintendo Wii, the Xbox or the PlayStation 2 can turn teens on to reading and writing.

"Games have a lot of literacy components to them. A lot of thinking, reading and comprehension. So we thought, 'Hey, how else can you engage teens today?'" said Stevens.

So, today's 9:30 a.m. keynote address is by Shawn McCann, newly hired gaming librarian at McMaster University. Officially, he's the immersive learnings librarian -- hired to put games to work in higher education.

Jen Gal, the youth services librarian at Central library, said the HPL started using gaming nights last summer to give teens "a very different library experience."

Monthly drop-in nights started small. But March break saw 30 kids, a full house as the HPL sets up two Wii systems and has games like Guitar Hero 3 and Super Smash Bros. projected on a screen three metres tall.

"If you host it, they will come. It's very gratifying on our end because you have teens lining up to get in to a program," Gal said.

"Traditionally boys are really hard to reach. We offer programs and they're 90 per cent girls, but this a great mix of both genders."

Gal, who will talk today on the ABCs of Gaming, says literacy comes in various forms in video games.

Kids read lyrics during SingStar or High School Musical: Sing It. There are more overtly educational games like vocabulary-builder, My Word Coach for the Wii. But kids also decode symbols whenever they pick up a new interface, like a cellphone or game controller, Gal said.

Other conference speakers will look at online learning, or the basics of Facebook and wikis and blogs, so parents and youth workers know what they are dealing with in the lives of teens.

OPP Sergeant Robyn MacEachern will address cyberbullying, which she considers a new incarnation of a much older problem.

Frontier College, a national literacy group founded in 1899, runs a local program of Mac students helping grade-level pupils with reading and writing, as well as community outreach to improve literacy.

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