OFF THE SHELF

A Generation With More Than Hand-Eye Coordination

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AS the father of an 11-year-old son, I often wonder what’s wrong with kids today. With my child as an exception, of course, they do not seem very bright. They appear to be shamelessly narcissistic, apathetic and lacking in social skills.

And even the best are hopelessly addicted to video games. How can an otherwise healthy boy like mine spend a sunny day playing World of Warcraft for five consecutive hours instead of playing soccer or baseball outdoors?

In “Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World” (McGraw-Hill), Don Tapscott tries to shatter the negative stereotypes of the so-called Net Generals, who currently range in age from 11 to 31. His book gives parents from the baby boom generation — like me — reason for optimism.

“As the first global generation ever, the Net Generals are smarter, quicker and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors,” he writes. “They care strongly about justice and the problems faced by their society and are typically engaged in some kind of civic activity at school, at work or in their communities.”

Mr. Tapscott, an adjunct professor of management at the University of Toronto, is the author or co-author of 11 books, including, from 1997, “Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation.” Its sequel, his new book, is based on interviews with nearly 10,000 people conducted as part of a $4 million project financed by large corporations under the auspices of his research and consulting firm, nGenera Innovation Network.

Mr. Tapscott says the Net Generation, also known as the millennials, is the biggest in history. He notes that more than 81 million people in the United States were born from 1977 to 1997, and that they now make up 27 percent of the population. By comparison, the baby boomers, born 1946 to 1964, were 77 million strong and are now 23 percent of the population.

But what really makes Net Geners different, Mr. Tapscott says, is their lifelong experience in using the Internet. Their parents were a television generation that watched the tube an average of 22.4 hours a week. Net Geners watch TV only 17.4 hours a week on average, but they spend 8 to 33 hours on the Internet. Whereas TV is basically a one-way broadcast medium that requires only passive participation, the Internet is a collaborative medium that invites simultaneous participation from multiple users all over the world.

Mr. Tapscott devotes an entire chapter to examining how Net Geners are already using their collective power to transform society — as evidenced by their impact on Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

Although the book went to press shortly after the Democratic primary season, he makes the longer-term point clearly enough. He documents how Mr. Obama capitalized on interactive social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace that inspired the participation of millions of small donors, while Hillary Rodham Clinton relied on relatively old broadcast-style media like television and e-mail to attract much lower numbers of mostly large donors.

Mr. Tapscott identifies eight norms of many members of the Net Generation: they prize freedom; they want to customize things; they enjoy collaboration; they scrutinize everything; they insist on integrity in institutions and corporations; they want to have fun even at school or work; they believe that speed in technology and all else is normal; and they regard constant innovation as a fact of life.

He cites recent brain-imaging and childhood-development studies to buttress his contention that Internet use by Net Geners has fundamentally changed — and improved — the way their brains are wired. Noting that raw I.Q. scores have been climbing by three points a decade since World War II across racial, income and regional boundaries, Mr. Tapscott asserts that Net Geners are also developing valuable skills that do not show up on standard I.Q. tests.

“Not only do video game players notice more, they have highly developed spatial skills that are useful for architects, engineers and surgeons,” he says.

Mr. Tapscott is not uncritical of Net Geners. He reports, for example, that a whopping 77 percent of his survey sample acknowledged having downloaded music without paying for it. “Most don’t view it as stealing, or if they do, they justify it in different ways,” he writes. “They see the music industry as a big business that deserves what it gets, or they think the idea of owning music is over. Some even think they’re doing small bands a favor.”

Mr. Tapscott decries the widening educational gap between the “thriving” and “failing” segments of the Net generation. Although the percentage of young people enrolling in college rose sharply from 1970 to 2003, he says, huge numbers of American teenagers drop out before finishing high school, and the average 15-year-old ranks in the bottom third in math and the midpoint in science relative to peers in other developed countries.

Mr. Tapscott’s most severe criticism of Net Geners is that they are “undermining their future privacy” by giving away vast amounts of personal information along with potentially embarrassing photographs and videos over the Internet. “They tell us they don’t care, that it’s all about sharing,” he writes. “But here I must speak with the voice of experience. Someday that party picture is going to bite them when they seek a senior corporate job or public office.”
THE book has a few flaws. One of them is its tendency to repeat points almost verbatim, like the assertion that Net Generals are “smarter, quicker and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors,” which appears on Page 6 and again, in nearly identical form, on Page 10. Even more annoying is the book’s penchant for cheerleading with unqualified assertions like, “The kids have got it right.”

Even so, “Grown Up Digital” is a must read for baby boomers and virtually anyone else born before 1977. As Mr. Tapscott observes, “The bottom line is this: if you understand the Net Generation, you will understand the future.” And as my son often reminds me, the future is now.