2016

Ready Librarian One

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Balance Point

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Abstract

The growth in academic programs devoted to the development of video games and the increased use of video gaming in education have led some academic libraries to build their own video game collections, as well as provide video game related services, space, and equipment. This column outlines several examples of academic library video game collections and services, provides information on building and maintaining video game related collections, and addresses a few of the challenges of providing services for this rapidly evolving industry.

Introduction / Background

Video games have long held a place in library collections, primarily as entertainment resources. References to video game acquisitions and circulation policies began to appear in the literature in the early 1980s. In a 1982 article in *School Library Journal*, Carol Emmens described collections of Atari video game cartridges circulating at four public libraries. The collections varied in size and circulation periods, but all four libraries reported high turnover and demand (Emmens, 1982). As resources for entertainment, video games have largely fallen within the

collecting domain of public libraries until recently. In the past decade, though, video games have begun to play a larger role in academic library collections and services.   The growth in academic programs devoted to the development of video games and the increased use of video gaming in education have led some academic libraries to build their own video game collections, as well as provide video game related services, space, and equipment. This column outlines several examples of academic library video game collections and services, provides information on building and maintaining video game related collections, and addresses a few of the challenges of this rapidly evolving industry.

Video Game Collections and Services

Laskowski and Ward (2009) posit that "[o]ne of the first steps in developing an academic gaming program is building a core collection of materials for students, instructors, and researchers to use in their work." Academic institutions of all shapes and sizes have cultivated video game collections in support of teaching and learning initiatives. Some of the more well-known collections include those at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC), the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), and the University of North Texas (UNT).

UIUC's video game collection began with an initial purchase of 100 video games in 2006 (Laskowski & Ward, 2009), and today the UIUC library catalog includes records for more than 1500 video game computer files.   A key philosophy of the UIUC collection is that the video games themselves function as primary sources for many types of gaming-related research, and "one challenge for academic libraries in the next decade is to find a way to preserve access to games that allows for them to be played and analyzed in a close approximation of their original

context" (Laskowski & Ward, 2009). As a result of this philosophy, at UIUC newer, current games circulate to patrons for one week, whereas vintage games in the gaming archive are available only by request, circulating to faculty for classroom and research use (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015).

Also established in 2006, the video game collection at UCSC started as a pilot project in support of the university's new video game design program. Careful planning and thought went into defining collection definitions and parameters, as well as loan rules and circulation policies. The video game collection, housed in the UCSC Science and Engineering Library, now includes more than 600 games and 40 consoles available for checkout (University of California Santa Cruz University Library, 2015). A key component to the video game program at UCSC, in addition the collection itself, was setting up a video game lab, a designated space to support the demands of the students in the Computer Game Design program (Kane, Soehner, & Wei, 2007).

UNT began collecting both video games and board games in 2009 in support of the university curriculum, as well as research initiatives. The UNT Media Library now holds almost 900 titles for a variety of gaming platforms. Robson and Durkee (2012) indicate that initially UNT "focused on attaining mainstream, commercial materials of high popular appeal because such works best suited the needs of [their] campus." They go on to add, though, that as game studies grow on campus they expect to encounter demand for a broader range of materials. With that in mind, they "have chosen to begin expanding [their] collection to encompass, independent, serious, and artistic games" (Robson & Durkee, 2012). Along with the video game collection,

UNT sponsors regular gaming social events, and has incorporated gaming services into its maker space The Factory. (http://www.library.unt.edu/services/factory)

It is important to note, though, that video game collections are not strictly the domain of larger institutions; nor is having a video game production or design program a prerequisite for an academic library to build a thriving gaming collection. Smaller schools have also started to see the benefits of incorporating video game collections and programming into their services. One such example, Williams College, a four-year liberal arts school in Williamstown, Massachusetts with an enrollment of just 2000 students, created a small video game collection in 2010 for recreational use by students. Funding for the program was awarded by the Williams College Council based upon a suggestion / request from two students (Pilachowski, 2010). At the time this column was written, Williams held 116 video games, circulating both the games and the controllers to its patrons.

Libraries interested in cultivating video game services need not compile a collection of games and consoles to do so, though. Gaming-related events and programming have grown in popularity at academic libraries as a way to interact and connect with patrons. A 2015 article in the *Journal of Library Innovation* outlines recent efforts by the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities Libraries (UMN) to sponsor gaming events, despite the fact that the university does not have a dedicated department for game scholarship on campus. After an initial unsuccessful attempt at video game programing during finals week, librarians at UMN partnered with existing student groups to provide video game related services. "Evaluating student preferences for gaming and considering our campus environment led us to conclude that we should support

gaming systems that are student driven, draw upon community resources, and focus on fostering small-scale collaborations" (Bishoff, Farrell, & Neeser, 2015). Since adopting this approach, UMN has sponsored several successful events including a partnership with a Physics student group to demonstrate an Oculus Rift, an interactive art exhibit utilizing an Xbox Kinect and a 3D scanning software, and hosting a panel of researchers who work with video games (Bishoff, Farrell, & Neeser, 2015).

Collection Development Challenges

The acquisition and circulation of video games raise a number of challenges for library faculty and staff. Issues such as collection policies, space, access, discoverability, and more need to be addressed to curate a video game collection successfully. Well-defined collection development policies play a key role in helping libraries determine where and how to focus their video game acquisitions efforts. Tappeiner and Lyons (2008) proposed four criteria for building video game collections in academic libraries: physical characteristics, implications for teaching and learning, subject content, and the cultural and historical value of games. What formats will be collected? How many copies of each game will be acquired? What is the intended purpose of the collection (e.g. recreation, classroom use, research)? Will the library purchase consoles and other equipment to support the use of the collection? Where will the games be housed? Will the items circulate, or will they be for in-library use only?

A starting point for many library video game collections is a list of core titles selected by university faculty. Nicholson (2013) explains:

"As colleges add game programming and game design programs and degrees, academic libraries are called upon to provide support for those degrees. Students in these degrees are expected to have familiarity with core collections of games, just as students in a literature program must have familiarity with a body of core literature. Academic libraries are called upon to to support the curricula by working with game design faculty members to identify the core games needed for course work and providing students with access to these games."

To cite one example, UCSC launched its video collection with the acquisition of multiple copies of 15 core video game titles selected by the faculty of the Computer Game Design program. (Kane, Soehner, & Wei, 2007)

A key consideration, though, in establishing a collection development policy for video games is flexibility. Most video game collections have been built with computer science and game design programs in mind. As the use of interactive gaming as both an educational tool and as an evaluation / assessment tool increases, collections will have to adapt to these changing demands. As Robson and Durkee (2012) explain, "We strive to establish approaches to collection development that both support projected future demand at our university and respond to transformations in games and the technologies through with they are accessed and played, all in ways that sustain the growth and stability of the collection in the long term."

Acquisition and Cataloging of Video Games

The usual library monographic vendors do not typically stock video games. Consequently, libraries often rely on alternative vendors, such as Amazon, for purchasing video games. Further

complicating the purchasing landscape is the fact that "[g]ames tend to go out of print much sooner than other material types, making timely acquisition a priority" (Laskowski & Ward, 2009). UIUC has found it effective to work with a local game retailer. This enables the library to use an institutional credit card, and, as Laskowski and Ward (2009) explain, a "local retailer can assist the library with collection building by reserving and holding hard to find titles and those for which there is often a long waiting list due to high demand."

Providing hardware and format support for video games presents its own unique challenges, as the wide variety of consoles available on the market make it difficult to assess which platforms to support. "Unlike the home video market, which typically moves from one primary format to another over a period of time, there are multiple viable game formats available at any give time...Therefore, a library game collection needs to cross a broad spectrum of platforms in order to reach the most patrons" (Laskowski & Ward, 2009). Consequently, a newly released video game may need to be purchased for several different gaming platforms. In addition, some libraries have opted to purchase and circulate not only video games, but also the consoles and controllers on which to play them. The UCSC collection, for example, currently includes equipment such as the Atari Flashback, Nintendo 64, Nintendo DS, Wii, Playstation 2, Playstation 3, and Xbox 360, all of which are available for a two week check-out. Similarly, UIUC supports all media formats currently collected by purchasing appropriate gaming consoles (Laskowski & Ward, 2009), circulated for one week at a time.

It is not uncommon for the presence of video games in an academic library to be challenged by patrons, either because of the graphic nature of the content (e.g. violent images, sexual content,

profanity) or the perception that video games are inappropriate for an academic collection. For example, shortly after adding the video game *Rage* to its collection, Carleton University Library (CUL) received requests from two faculty members to remove the item. The complaint was that the "game exposed students to danger and insidious representations of militaristic violence and aggressive masculinity" (Cross, Mould, & Smith, 2015). Ultimately, the request to have the game removed was declined. However, the issue yielded vigorous discussion, and prompted CUL to review its challenged materials policy. For libraries drafting collection development policies regarding video games it may be advisable to include some wording on how to handle patron challenges to controversial material (Cross, Mould, & Smith, 2015).

Cataloging video games and the accompanying equipment generates another set of challenges for libraries. Laskowski and Ward (2009) found that "as relatively few libraries are purchasing games, a higher than usual percentage of the materials needed original cataloging since there were no existing cataloging records to draw from." This need for more original cataloging can lead to longer processing times and requires special effort on the part of the library and the cataloger to describe and differentiate games from each other consistently. At UIUC, the cataloging prefix GAME was used, and new standards regarding format / platform specifications were required (Laskowski & Ward, 2009). Further complicating the logistics of video game cataloging is the fact that "many games are released for multiple platforms simultaneously, which makes it necessary for the catalogers to have significant expertise in identifying and describing the system requirements for each version vital" (Laskowski & Ward, 2009).

In addition to the challenges presented by system requirements and original cataloging, there are persistent issues with the flexibility and adaptability of the cataloging rules themselves. While both AACR2 and MARC 21 have been updated frequently to accommodate the changing characteristics of computer resources, including video games, often the formats and resources change much faster than the cataloging rules are able to keep up (De Groat, 2015). DeGroat (2015) further explains:

> Consistent terminology has been elusive, making it difficult to collocate materials or provide a consistent search or limit strategy to find all like materials. RDA and the recent MARC 21 updates have provided more granularity and some controlled vocabulary, but continue to better describe simple electronic resources and data files than complex media like games and other interactive works.

PC and Online Gaming

Thus far, this discussion of video games in libraries has focused primarily on console-based gaming, but personal computer (PC) games and online gaming play an increasingly significant role in the video game industry, and many libraries seek to provide services for those materials as well. PC games are particularly problematic for libraries, as many are sold with a non-transferable license agreement. Installation typically requires that the game be permanently registered to a single user (Cross, Mould, & Smith, 2015), making it impossible for a library to lend the game to multiple patrons. To address this issue on their campus, CUL "has opted to make PC games available through a dedicated gaming lab: patrons cannot borrow games, bug can book time on stations and play available games there" (Cross, Mould, & Smith, 2015). Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) gaming presents a similar, yet slightly different set of

challenges, including issues with multi-user licensing and game duration.   User accounts in

many MMO games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, are also licensed to a single person,

and some games are intended to last over a period of weeks, months, or even years, making it

difficult for a single account to accommodate multiple users, both legally and logistically.

Some libraries are considering services like Steam (http://store.steampowered.com/) as a

potential solution to the problems with PC and online gaming. A digital distribution market for

online games, Steam had more than 3500 games available as of December 2015. Through the

Steam store, a user licenses games, and the licenses for those games are then permanently

attached to the user's account. Steam's Family Library Sharing program allows a user to share

the contents of their account with other users, but it isn't clear yet how libraries could take

advantage to Steam's capabilities and services.

Notably omitted from much of this discussion of video games in libraries are mobile games,

defined here as games designed for play on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. As

Cross, Mould, and Smith (2015) point out, these games are directly downloaded to a device from

either the publisher or a third party vendor, and "[t]he ecosystem around mobile games does not

seem amenable to archiving and distributing games through the library."

Assessment and Future Directions

As games and gaming technologies have been integrated into classrooms and labs, the use of

video games and gaming programs are on the rise in academic libraries.   Brown (2014) points

out, though, that "[i]f gaming is going to continue to grow, however, implementation must be

accompanied with equal attention devoted to assessment and measurement in order to understand the impact games are having on library spaces." Assessment can encompass a variety of factors including, but not limited to, the ways in which video games and related materials are being used, the informations needs of gaming students and user behavior, best practices, and more.

In his review of the literature related to video games and assessment, Brown (2014) identifies four broad perspectives on the assessment of video games and gaming: program-centric, event-centric, game-centric, and player-centric. The assessment studies featured in Brown's literature review seek to answer a variety of questions regarding the use of the collections, their impact on users, and the information literacy skills of gamers. However, Brown goes on to say that the "current assessment tools are not capturing the learning associated with gaming in ways that could be more compelling to stakeholders, trustees, and other members of the public." More work is required to determine the ways in which library video game collections and services are actually impacting the learning environment at academic institutions.

According to *Game Career Guide* online, more than 400 institutions currently offer either certificates or degrees in video game related education (UBM Tech, 2015). Up till now, though, little research has been done into the information seeking behavior of students in academic video game related programs. A 2014 study at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) took a step towards understanding how game students seek information and via what research methods, identifying particular resources that the students found helpful and observing that their information needs are seen as problems to be solved (Miller, 2014). However, the study at SCAD was a small scale, focus group style study of only 11 students. More comprehensive,

large scale research is need to better understand and generalize both the needs and behaviors of students in this field of study, as well as how libraries can best meet those needs.

The acquisitions and circulation of video games and the associated equipment create a number of challenges for libraries. There are issues related to collection development, acquisition, cataloging, and space management. Further complicating the video game landscape for libraries are PC games and online gaming, such as MMOs. As library collections expand to encompass gaming related materials and library spaces adapt to accommodate gaming labs and equipment, continued assessment of our spaces, our users, and our services is required to determine the ways these materials and services impact the learning environment.

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