

Game Scholar: Do We Need a Reference Database for Video Game Research?

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Abstract: Given the growing influence of video games and the likelihood that video games will be the focus of an increasing amount of criticism and research, we suggest that a comprehensive information resource on the topic could be of significant value to the scholarly community. The Game Scholar prototype and research study are aimed at understanding whether there is in fact a need for such a resource and if so, what information would be most useful to include in the resource.

Introduction

From their beginnings as primitive text-oriented applications less than fifty years ago, video games have rapidly evolved into sophisticated, graphic-intensive and immersive experiences. The appeal of these experiences has quickly lifted the videogame industry to a prominent place, both economically and culturally, in contemporary society. While optimistic predictions about the growing influence of video games, such as that they “may well soon replace cinema, cable and broadcast television as the dominant popular medium” (Shuker, 1995, as cited in Newman, 2004) might be premature, the Entertainment Software Association (2008) reported growth in video game revenue increased 28% in the year 2007 over 2006, with an estimated 267.8 million computer and video games sold during the year. The number of scholars and cultural critics who recognize the importance of video games is also increasing, as their influence on an expanding range of societal, cultural, artistic, economic, and technological factors is examined in both the popular and scholarly literature. Despite this recent increased attention (including in the information and library science world¹), as a focused area of criticism and research video games have barely passed “Year One” (Aarseth, 2001) and the range and volume of video game related scholarship is poised to accelerate dramatically.

As a medium video games are often compared to film. Beyond the audio-visual nature of each, there are similarities in aspects such as narrative structure, production processes, and cultural significance, and overlapping areas of scholarly study (Wolf, 2002). A widely-used reference resource for film is the Internet Movie Database (IMDb; <http://www.imdb.com>). As pointed out in Naun & Elhard (2005), the IMDb is considered to be a valuable reference tool by librarians and other information professionals. Just as IMDb serves as a prime resource for a broad range of users—from casual filmgoers and movie buffs to critics and industry professionals—interested in obtaining facts associated with films and television programs, we suggest a similar resource for video games would be of significant value as the area continues to grow. In fact, a comprehensive video game resource could arguably be even more valuable to scholars than IMDb is for film-related studies. For while IMDb is an extensive and widely-used resource for casual film reference, it was created many years after the film and television industries were established and done so primarily to serve the needs of the everyday film buff, not film scholars. A similar resource for video games, on the other hand, containing facts, screen shots, video excerpts, and other reference information of value to critics and researchers, could benefit from being created at the nascent stage of the field’s development and ultimately prove to be a more useful resource for scholarly work.

Research Questions

Given a landscape where critics and scholars are focusing increasingly on video games, we believe a comprehensive information resource—in the form of a Web-based reference database—could be quite useful. At the same time, developing such a resource—even at this relatively early stage in video game history—will require a significant investment in time and resources. Thus there are two initial overarching questions we seek to resolve:

- Is there a real need among critics, scholars, enthusiasts, or other user groups for a video game resource?
- If so, what information about video games would be most helpful to these users for their video game related information needs?

Research Approach

We are currently investigating these questions using several distinct methods, each aimed at providing evidence that will enable us to determine: 1) whether this is an effort worth pursuing, 2) if so, what specific information would be most useful and feasible to include in the information resource, and 3) how the resource should be designed and developed, particularly in light of the continual need for adding and reviewing new data to ensure the resource is current and credible. The primary methods we are using and the objectives of each are summarized below.

Environmental scan: The primary work of this phase is to thoroughly investigate and document existing information resources and projects to answer such questions as: What general evidence is there for the growing importance of and/or focus on video games? Are there significant research projects or initiatives in this area? What resources related to video games already exist? To whom are these resources directed and what sort of information do they provide?

Based on our initial environmental scan, we have developed a working prototype of a Web-based resource for video games, called *Game Scholar*. Figure 1 shows the main page of the Game Scholar, while Figure 2 shows an example of the detail page for a selected game, with metadata documenting the platform, publisher, release date, and other basic game details, plus screen shots and video excerpts that provide users with an easy way to get a feel for the game's visual style and gameplay.

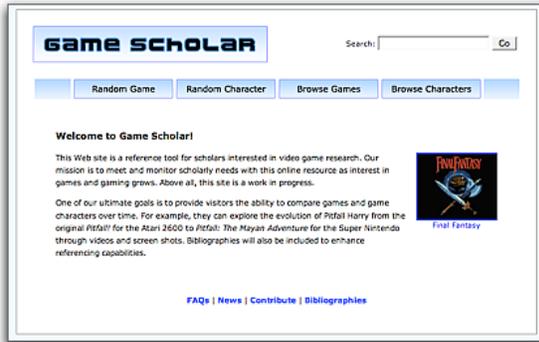


Figure 1. Game Scholar main page

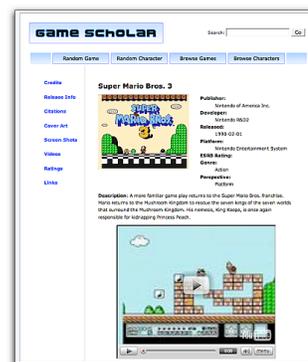


Figure 2. Detail page for selected game

Qualitative interviews: We are conducting semi-structured interviews with people who either work, teach, or do research related to video games. The objective of these interviews is to better understand how these people accomplish their work, what information resources they currently use, and what ideas they might have for additional resources useful for their work. The Game Scholar prototype is used in these interviews to prompt ideas and solicit feedback from the participants.

Content analysis: To obtain a broader perspective of the types of scholarly work that has been and is being conducted related to video games, we are conducting a content analysis of published articles drawn from a diverse range of publication venues and disciplines. By systematically identifying and categorizing the manifest content (e.g., references to specific game titles and platforms, study objectives, primary discipline of author) of published work, we will be better able to understand the types of users who could potentially benefit from Game Scholar and design the resource to support the work that they do.

Results

Our preliminary work indicates there is in fact a need for a comprehensive information resource that documents video games; more complete results from our three methods of investigation will be summarized in our poster, including details about the types of users and information needs the Game Scholar resource would serve, the specific game-related metadata that would be most beneficial to include in the resource, and issues related to the feasibility and strategy for actually developing the resource.

Notes

1 For example, a growing list of relevant LIS-oriented blogs includes “Game On: Games in Libraries” <<http://libgaming.blogspot.com/>> and “Library Games” <<http://librarygames.blogspot.com/>>, and ALA TechSource and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) sponsored the the first annual *Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium* in July, 2007.

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