

Current Issues Paper: Video Games and Librarianship

Video games are one of the largest entertainment industries in the world with Gartner (Meulen and Rivera, 2013) estimating the global market being worth approximately \$93 Billion in 2013 yet are extremely unrepresented in library collections. Video games are entertainment software and rely on cutting edge technology to cater to user wants or needs. As a result the industry rapidly evolves and changes making it hard for libraries to come to resolutions on new resultant issues while they are still tackling old ones like the social stigma associated with video games. In this paper I will explore the current issues around video games that are preventing them from appearing in library collections more regularly.

Perception

I think one issue videogames face, not only in librarianship but in the broader public as well, is the negative perception people have them. In particular that videogames have little to offer aside from time-wasting and most involving violence (Braun and Marcantonio, 2012). Gershenfeld, (2011) an educator that worked with troubled or “disengaged youth”, found a high percentage of them enjoyed playing video games. While on the surface it would seem this matches the stereotype Gershenfeld (2011) did go on to write that drop outs from school, or students whom perform poorly, had substantial coding and digital imaging skills which they learned on their own as a result of their interest in games. Gershenfeld (2011) went on the theorize that these students were most likely bored by the material, or method of teaching, offered in schools and suggests is that these kids are just more interested getting their hands on cutting edge technology and software, which videogames certainly are, than traditional schooling. More to the point specifically of content in videogames there has been a huge

industrial shift towards small independently created games rather than the violent shooting type game that is more commonly thought of. In “Indie Game: The Movie” Pajot and Swirsky (2012) profiles several indie developers and notes that games made by this community are outstripping those made by large companies. These games, typically but not always, are deeply personal and tackle issues one would not expect. One example is a recently released game called “Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons” in which the lead creator retells the story of having witnessed his brother die as a child in war-torn Lebanon and the effect it had on him as a human. Another game is “Gone Home” which follows the story of a teenage girl struggling with her sexual identity and what it meant for her relationship with her parents (Klepik, 2013). This is just to say that breaking the perception that videogames, as an interactive medium, have more to offer outside of the mainstream products is essential in seeing them show up more in libraries.

Cost

I would suggest one of the biggest obstacles in having video games in library collections is their cost. With new retail gamers averaging about sixty dollars and rarer older games sometimes values exceeding well over one hundred dollars it's easy to see why libraries might shy away from having them in their collection. There are also access issues with how to deliver those materials to patrons. The newest game consoles, Playstation 4 and the X-Box One, retail at \$399 and \$499 respectfully, which is a huge paywall a patron would have to breach before they could use any video games in the libraries collections. That is without even considering the cost of a gaming computer which can easily exceed \$1000. An argument could perhaps be made it is antithetical to the libraries ethos of trying to provide free, or low cost, services to their patrons and engage in services that help lessen any social-economical divisions we have by providing resources. Thinking to my own situation I was raised in a single parent home and it seems

almost inconceivable to me that my Mother would have been able to have enough money to purchase a \$400 or \$500 dollar video game console for me. So having video games that require such a large financial investment from the patron would be providing resources to people that would appear to have less need of them than those whom could not afford to make the initial purchase.

Preservation

As we learned in class one of the functions of libraries, and in particular large institutions, is preservation of materials that might otherwise become lost to time. This sentiment is furthered by Gorman (1995-6, 2006) who goes on to suggest that “onward transmissions of our cultural heritage”, through the preservation of materials, is a “key” responsibility of libraries. Furthermore Gorman (2006) is quite critical of contemporary libraries arguing that the shift in providing, or promoting, services is overshadowing preservation which he believes has been a core function of libraries throughout history. This is of particular issue to videogames because, as software stored on physical mediums, they have a shelf-life which will predate them entering into the public domain. Zainzinger (2012) conducted an interview with the curator of the Computerspielemuseum, in Berlin, which is currently the world’s largest video game museum. In that interview Andreas Lange, the museum’s curator, discusses how European copyright law is preventing them from making copies of their games (Zainzinger, 2012). Lange goes on to say without changing the formats of the games, like creating a digital copy, that they cannot do much but wait for the information stored on the magnetic drives in the games cartridges, or on CD, to die. Zainzinger (2012) closes by assuring the reader that massive preservation efforts are being undertaken by fans in the community and the entire catalogue of most gaming systems is available online for posterity’s sake, the problem of course, is that these

digital copies violate copyright law and distribution of them is illegal. I think this is where libraries could step in and make a difference as, at least in Canada, they hold a privileged position in copyright law. In particular S30.1 (A) of the Copyright Act allows a library, archive or museum to make a copy of a rare item if “deteriorating, damaged or lost” or at the risk of becoming so. More realistically librarians could invoke S30.1 (C) of the Copyright Act which allows them to make a copy in another format if “that the original is currently in a format that is obsolete or is becoming obsolete, or that the technology required to use the original is unavailable or is becoming unavailable”. I think this may be a tough sell for CD-rom games, or even cartridge bases games, a case could certainly be made for arcade games. Arcade games are stored on large computer chips, about the size of ones monitor, with some containing on-board batteries that, if it dies prior to being replaced, renders the chip useless. Furthermore the means to play these games, a cabinet that weighs several hundred pounds and carries a serious electrocution risk, I think could be argued to be an example of an obsolete technology. In my example a library could purchase the arcade game boards and quite easily make them available for patrons in an alternative digital format on their on-site computers.

Distribution

In much the same way eBooks have muddied the waters as to what it means to “buy” or “borrow” a book from the library and I think the way videogames are distributed are, perhaps, the biggest issue going forward. Focusing on computer games here, for the time being, at this point they are distributed almost entirely digitally. Valve, a videogame company, has almost a total monopoly on computer game distribution through their Steam service. Steam is similar in concept to I-Tunes, only for videogames, where a user’s purchases are tied to their account indefinitely and they can delete, and re-download, any game on their list as much as they like.

As all purchases are done on the individual level there is, presently, no way a library could conceivably offer games to their patrons. Any kind of initiative to do so would require working directly with Valve as far as I can tell. Although console games still are distributed physically this is quickly becoming a thing of the past, for example the most recent X-Box very nearly shipped without the capacity to play games directly from the game disk, as the trend is towards digital. Another distribution trend is to ship games incomplete, and then patch them upon release, or to allow users access to the beta. This new way of distribution really complicates what the final game, which should be the product added to the collection, is. There are also some games, like World of Warcraft, which have no single player and must be played online in real-time with other users, which might always be unsuitable for a library collection because there is no way to really “loan” it to a patron. Lastly the digital distribution of games has led to an explosion of user-created content which really challenges the idea of what is suitable for a collection. Even if a collection policy states only retail products are to be included a very popular game like Kerbal Space Program is heavily populated with in-game items created by users. If that is the case we are excluding video game related content which is hugely popular. One example is a Twitch video stream of multiple users playing the game Pokemon which, in just over two weeks, has had over 46 million total views (Twitch TV, 2014).

Conclusion

There are many issues relating to having video games include in library collections. Negative perception and stereotypes about video games are still very prevalent, despite the industry being one of the largest in the entertainment field, which is one reason they may be kept out of library collections. Another, and perhaps more on the mark, is the huge financial investment both the library and patron would have to make to have video games appear in

collections. There is a real preservation need however as we saw an example of a video game museum express concern that their collection will not survive without intervention. Lastly the digital distribution of video games is incapable with the current model of how libraries operate. As we learned in class the lending of eBooks is somewhat contentious, and muddy, and potentially lending digital games to patrons is several steps beyond that. My personal view is that libraries should get their hands on a selection of arcade games, which are relatively inexpensive, as they are the easiest of the examples provided in this essay to provide access to and are in most need of preservation.

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