Media Minder - Building a Video Game Collection: Resources to Help you Get Started

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My interest in video games began, and subsequently ended, with the release of Pong. It was Christmas, 1975, and my eldest brother bought a system for all us kids as a family gift. We proceeded to open the box and placed the overlay on the television screen. Excitedly, we hooked up the cable connections at the back of the set. These were the days long before installing a VCR was an act similar to screwing in a new light bulb, so that anything behind the set seemed foreign and a risky undertaking best left to a TV repair man. After a few minutes of tinkering, we were ready to play.

Two rectangles about the size of a cigarette lighter appeared on the screen and the remote control allowed you to move the rectangles up or down in a straight line. A smaller ball of light went back and forth across the screen in a manner reminiscent to ping pong (hence the game’s name) and the object was to use the bigger rectangles as if they were paddles and hit the ball of light out of the reach of your opponent. When the “ball” was struck, an electronic noise, kind of like a thump sound, was generated. Like Peggy Lee, I asked myself “is that all there is?” The excitement I felt initially soon vanished and I probably played it no more than a half dozen times. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one to feel that way. While hundreds of thousands of units were sold that first Christmas, it didn’t generate the massive interest in home video games that its manufacturers had hoped for or intended and most Pong games were relegated to the basement and eventually the junkyard.

Fast forward three decades. Thanks to the world wide success of the home computer and vast improvements in technology, video game design has improved exponentially and the home video game market is so successful that it now rivals and often outsells movie ticket sales as the primary source of popular entertainment. Yet, The Wall Street Journal reported that Warner Bros, film studio announced that they were undertaking a concerted effort to become a major video game publisher. According to the article, the film industry is feeling the heat from the new kid on the block. Lower box-office returns, revenues lost to piracy and slowing DVD sales have led the studios to begin developing their own video games in order to compete more effectively. Additionally, the concept of convergence is upon us. The relationship between movies and games will be greater than ever. Most will be marketed and promoted together and noted directors will be hired to help create the look of the game in addition to the film.

So where do libraries fit into this equation? They’ve joined in as well. Or, at least some have. Public libraries are accustomed to collecting what the general public demands, so many now have full out collection development and circulation policies for video games. Academic libraries are further behind, but not all. The University of Michigan and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, two of the top ten largest library collections in the country, are going full speed ahead to collect and develop video game collections and archives to be used by their campus communities. According to its Website, the University of Texas at Austin’s Center for American History has already created a video game archive that will seek “to collect and provide access to materials that not only facilitate research in...
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videogame history, but also provide materials of interest to those studying communications, computer science, economics, and other academic disciplines that are now, and will for the foreseeable future, be drawn to the processes driving the videogame industry.”

Media librarians uninitiated in the ways of video game collecting may be asking “where do I begin?” Like any librarian asked to develop a collection, the same types of tools and resources are available to help understand the history of the medium and to place it into some better context for the selector. As in all cases, reviews are used as a starting source. With video games and gaming in general, a majority of the better reviewing sources will be online resources. Websites and blogging sites are the best ways to keep relevant rather than print sources.

Getting Started…

Books

Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter (Steven Johnson, 2005, Riverhead)
Encyclopedia of Arcade Video Games (Bill Kurtz, 2003, Schiffer Publishing)

The Encyclopedia of Game Machines (Winnie Forster, 2005, Magdalena Gniatcynska)
The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon (Steven L. Kent, 2001, Three Rivers Press)
Paid to Play: An Insider’s Guide to Video Game Careers (Alice Rush, 2006, Prima Games)

Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture (David Kushner, 2004, Random House Trade Paperbacks)
Video Games Guide (Matt Fox, 2006, Boxtree Ltd)

Book of Games, Volume 1: The Ultimate Guide to PC & Video Games (Stang, 2006, gameXplore N.A. Inc.)

Book of Games, Volume 2: The Ultimate Reference on PC & Video Games (Stang, Osterholt, 2007, gameXplore N.A. Inc.)

Classic 80s Home Video Games: Identification & Value (Robert P. Wicker, 2008, Collector Books)

What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy (James Paul Gee, 2007, Palgrave Macmillan; 2nd edition)

Good Video Games and Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy (New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies) (James Paul Gee, 2007, Peter Lang Publishing)

For some, there will always be a nagging suspicion of the medium and questions will continue to be raised about its relevance. Others may be concerned about giving a portion of their already small non-print media collection which barely buys enough DVDs and CDs over to video games. Steven Johnson’s book is a great source for contextualizing the reasons why building a collection is acceptable and a good first read. The others will help to identify classic and current games that you may wish to consider purchasing or that will help students consider what career opportunities are available.

Reviews

C/Net (www.cnet.com)
G4 Television Network (www.g4tv.com)
IGN Entertainment (www.ign.com)
Gaming Target (www.gamingtarget.com)
Game Rankings (www.gamerankings.com)
Game Spot (www.gamespot.com)

School Library Journal (www.slj.com)

Reading reviews is an essential element to collecting video games, but the majority of reliable reviews will be found online rather than in print sources. The first four are recommended sites by an avid gamer who trusts the reviews. This same gamer prefers these to reviews by average bloggers who post to their individual sites. Many blogging sites are hit or miss given that most sites are updated intermittently and inconsistent in knowledge or overview of the field. He also suggested Amazon because so many game buyers will add comments after purchasing items. Many of the sites offer downloads so that users can try out a game and see if they wish to purchase it.

Journals/Magazines

Electronic Gaming Monthly (www.1up.com)

Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research (http://gamestudies.org)
Game Informer (www.gameinformer.com)

Games for Windows (www.gfw.com)

Nintendo Power (www.nintendopower.com)
Official Xbox Magazine (www.officialxboxmagazine.com)

PC Gamer (www.pc gamer.com)

PC Monthly (www.mcpmonth line.com)

Geek Monthly (www.geekmonthly.com)

Play (www.playmagazine.com)

Wired (www.wired.com)

Compared to other disciplines, the selections are limited in numbers. Game Studies is a peer-reviewed journal whose mission is “to explore the rich cultural genre of games; to give scholars a peer-reviewed forum for their ideas and theories; to provide an academic channel for the ongoing discussions on games and gaming.” Electronic Gaming Monthly and Game Informer are broader in scope compared to the others which provide detailed information for specific platform. The last three listed are general interest magazines and provide an overview of games but also computing in general.

Webpages of Interest

Online Education Database (http://oedb.org/library/features/bringing_gaming_100_library_resources)

This page written by Jessica Merritt and entitled “Bringing Gaming (and Gamers) to Your Library: 100 Tips and Resources” is something you definitely want to bookmark. First, it begins by providing the library selector with 39 tips to make the selection process easier. Some are practical, some are promotional, but it is certain to have five or six things that you simply didn’t think about. Following the tips are a great selection of magazine and journal articles, additional books, blogs and collections to peruse.

Core Collections: Video Game Evaluation, Selection, Cataloging, Storage and Marketing (http://www.slideshare.net/informationgoddess/29/core-collections/)

This power point presentation by Beth Gallaway, self-proclaimed information goddess, is indeed packed with information. It points out all the various considerations that one needs to get started in a beautifully concise and detailed manner.

All books listed, as well as individual games one would wish to purchase, are available through Ambassador Books & Media.

And, speaking of scholarships, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the ACS Charleston Conference Scholarship which has been funded for several years. This year’s winner is Elizabeth Dyer <edyer@une.edu>. Thanks to ACS and Adam Chesler and his group for this wonderful opportunity!

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