

Your Princess is in Another Castle: Moving Video Game Cataloging away
from Traditional Metadata

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Introduction

The ubiquity of video games in contemporary American life is undeniable. Yet, despite this, cultural institutions have been slow to adopt systems that adequately integrate video games into their collections, whether on display or in storage. Libraries and museums in particular bring up the rear when it comes to classification and cataloging. And to be fair, the hesitation is understandable; the shift to personal video games and their relative consoles from the behemoths in arcades was relatively sudden, and the audience for those was (initially, at least) easily outnumbered by an audience that was enamored by the new availability of VHSs and CDs. The shift from MARC to RDA reflects an obvious response to the latter circumstance, and so when video games fit less neatly into already expanded subfields of new or in-testing metadata standards, it makes sense that this item category is paid less attention to. However, we now live in a society of which video games are taking on an increasing number of cultural roles, from a form of community event to the foundation of social skills in young people, and as museums begin to build exhibit display for them and libraries are asked to carry them (due to many factors, but the unrelentingly high cost of individual games most likely chief among them), there was (and continues to be) less and less of an excusable reason to keep video games to the way side in terms of bibliographic schema.

Therefore, what I am most curious about, and explore further in this paper, is how libraries and museums today have approached cataloging and classifying video games in their collections. How have RDA and FRBR been employed? What other metadata standards have been created or adapted for this usage? How has the interactive nature of video games played a role in their institutional classification?

Compliance with existing standards

In 2015, the first version of the “Best Practices for Cataloging Video Games: Using RDA and MARC21” was presented by the Video Game RDA Best Practices Task Force, which was comprised of nine members from university libraries across the United States and advised by a small team including representatives from the Library of Congress and OCLC. Version 1.1 was released in April 2018, and the description of the document, and thereby stating why such a document is necessary at 96 pages in length, is thus: “While a cataloger with experience handling different formats will find that many concepts extend to video games, there are a few ‘quirks’ to the format that those unfamiliar with video games should know about.”

Without delving too much into every RDA subfield that this Task Force looked at (of which there are at least 29), I’ll briefly focus on a few. The RDA guidelines for video game cataloging were adapted from OLAC’s “Best Practices for Cataloging DVD and Blu-Ray Discs,” and this becomes clear when looking at what is thought of as RDA’s most important update to MARC21—the content, media, and carrier types represented by subfields 336, 337, and 338. Vocabulary such as “computer chip cartridge” and “computer card” is introduced and the derivatives seem somewhat natural in their evolution across the three subfields.

Examples that show a more serious tailoring to video games come from the 5XX field. RDA’s 7.7 rules are for “intended audience” and are usually intended to distinguish materials for different ages or abilities; the Task Force retools this for the ESRB ratings of E(veryone), T(een), M(ature), etc. The interaction element also begins to come through in the 500 fields, where the number of players should be designated.

Yet, these still fall a bit short of capturing the interactive nature of the video games. While it can be argued that a user has the ability to interact with every item in a library's public collection at a very basic tactile level, a video game requires more interaction, both physically and digitally. Luckily, the best practices for RDA compliance put forth here also addresses the use of FRBR in building and recording relationships. Relationships designators for video games rely heavily on the WEMI breakdown, particularly when a video game has different special editions, sequels, movie tie-ins, and series crossovers with other video games.

But there are, of course, still some hiccups. Naturally, some of them come from the fact that RDA is still in its infancy, and so updates are continuously being rolled out. Current RDA rules for "preferred titles conflict with past [Library of Congress] policies for using games as subject headings," though the Task Force assure their audience that OLAC and LC will work together to find an acceptable compromise between practices ("Best Practices for Cataloging Video Games: Using RDA and MARC21").

The Task Force also worked with the support of the Game Metadata and Citation Project (GAMECIP). GAMECIP was a multi-year joint investigation from a team of metadata librarians, game researchers, and computer scientists from UC Santa Cruz and Stanford University. (Additionally, GAMECIP, its projects, and all forthcoming papers are supported by the IFLA, which as an independent government agency points to a future in which we can reasonably hope to see the GAMECIP findings incorporated into national standards—perhaps one day even bridging the issue of subject headings with the Library of Congress.)

After identifying multiple problems with standardizing digital file cataloging, creating SEO metadata, and avoiding ad-hoc citation styles, GAMEECIP's overall goal was to "propose a framework for solving these problems by creating publishable metadata schema, including ontology and terminology for digital games, and a system and tools for citation of in-game events and game-states."

Leaving the citation project aside, their metadata project breaks down into two parts: locating parts of existing metadata that can be remolded to fit video game cataloging, and creating new terminology through controlled vocabularies. GAMEECIP seems to be more interested in making recommendations in how to improve existing schema than building schema from scratch. Their research focuses on methods of using existing descriptive and structural metadata to illuminate properties of the games, including "spatial and virtual world references, interaction schemes, gameplay idiosyncrasies, and... advanced system requirements," as a means of building more efficient ways to crosswalk metadata (GAMEECIP official website).

The effort of ground-up work seems to be focused on their terminology projects; the vocabularies they develop will be paired with their metadata recommendations when presented as a unit to cataloging systems.

By both examining current practices and investigating new avenues, GAMEECIP's existence opens up the floor for discussion of other types of metadata for videogames, outside of our tried and true bibliographic standards.

A new approach

The University of Washington's School of Information, under the leadership of Professor Jin Ha Lee, formed the Game Research Group (GAMER). Started as a collaboration with

the Seattle Interactive Media Museum, GAMER is dedicated to researching new ideas for “organizing and providing access to video games and interactive media”, as well as to developing and maintaining their core project, the Video Game Metadata Schema (VGMS).

Lee has expressed her disapproval of FRBR’s range in covering video games in a separate paper (Jett et al., 2016), which contributes to the complete metadata overhaul in the VGMS. And much like OLAC’s best practices’ frustration with the LC subject and genre headings, Lee’s team early on found that current labeling for genres of video games were “inconsistent, vague, and undefined... too broad and vague to be of use” (Lee et al., 2012). The VGMS expands on these models by adding more specific entity types and linking them together in more specific patterns, with in-depth relationships like special hardware, connectivity, collection notes, and agent names.

Somewhat surprisingly, at least to me, was that the VGMS ranked the actual experience of playing the game (the interactive component) as the least preferable source of metadata information for both physical and digital games. Instead, the game is treated much like a book in terms of a source of information; the box, then the manual, then the in-game play title screen and credits, are ranked first in terms of primary sources of cataloging data (VGMS Version 4.0).

The interactive element is both ignored and wholly incorporated. Rather than looking at it head-on in terms of the game entity itself, its influence is heavily recognizable in some of the controlled vocabularies attached to the VGMS. Fields for POV and Ending allow for knowledge of the player experience within game play (first person, third person, overhead, or other) and the recognition of multiple or singular

endings (and if it ends at all), respectively. Within the Game Entity field, there are the subfields most directly linked to the nature of the game play itself; the VGMS defines this field as “an abstract entity that describes features that are shared among different editions of a video game. The characteristics that are typically recognized by users when they say ‘we played the same game’ even if they played it on different platforms.” The subfields most related to interaction include “Narrative Genre,” “Theme,” “Mood,” “Mechanic,” and “Progression.” The terminology within “Progression” is a great example of how this new schema works as the subfield affords flexibility for every type of video game, whether it is: linear (Super Mario Brothers), branching (MegaMan), open world (Skyrim), or other.

Conclusion

The existence of OLAC’s Task Force, GAMECIP, and GAMER shows a willingness from the metadata community to turn video game cataloging into a project worthy of serious research. And while the VGMS is still only a couple years old and lacks data from implementation case studies to confirm its promising potential, it is still a great starting point for a holistic schema unencumbered by traditional terms from bibliographic standards—especially as cataloguers stare down the barrel of an industry whose output multiplies unbelievably every year. The next five years will be an interesting time for the video game metadata projects, and I for one look forward to seeing their influence in collection systems.

Keywords

1. Video games
2. RDA
3. Interactive
4. GAMER
5. GAMECIP
6. Metadata
7. Vocabulary

Resources

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