Preface

Games have always been a part of my life; I have grown up with them. They have been about fun and entertainment, but more often than not, they have been an avenue for education and learning. My earliest memories of games, or at least memories related to me by my mother in stories, have to do with playing Candyland and Memory (with playing cards). She maintains, to this day, that my sister and I would regularly beat her at Memory with her trying her hardest. Could be true but… probably just mom trying to be proud of her kids.

Games also taught me to count, but not in the traditional way that you would think. My parents taught me how to play Blackjack, and that is how I learned to count. My friends always thought it was great fun to come over to our house because my parents would play dealer for us and we would just play card games (including Blackjack and Poker. My parents got some calls from other parents now and then on the topic). We did not really understand the gambling part of the games, but they were fun to play and we were learning at the same time. I got to be so proficient with Blackjack, that when my mom was planning and putting on a Casino Night, I helped to train all of the adults on how to be dealers and how to play the game. I think I was 12.

The transition to video games was an easy one for me, starting with a regular Nintendo (Zelda!), and moving on to different Nintendo consoles, and eventually to PC gaming. I have very distinct memories of playing Warcraft II when I was in middle school, and learning that the engineer across the street (in his 30s with kids my age), had it as well. We spent hours trying to connect an online multiplayer game with each other, but could not figure it out (My first experience with really understanding how the Internet worked and trying to connect two machines together). Good ol’ dial-up. These days, battle.net exists for those sorts of things and is easy to use (but is just one example of multiplayer environments).

My video game habits remain consistent to this day, but in high school I added tennis as a game to my regular playing habits. I ended up playing on varsity in both high school and at a NCAA Division II school in college. Games have always been a part of the fabric of my life, and they have provided a wide range of different experiences for me, which I do not think could be easily duplicated in other ways. The challenges that games present are usually straightforward, but the solutions to those challenges are not. Overcoming the challenges, whether it be through innovation (like a puzzle game), or through physical training (for tennis), is what truly drives me to love games. The challenge, to me, also comes from the competition. Not all games are competitive, but that is where I truly love games: being able to compete. Competing with others is great fun, but it is also fun to compete with myself to become better.
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I still game regularly, and I get to combine my passion for competition and striving to better myself (like I did with tennis), with the social and educational aspects of other games that I played while growing up. Now, I get to combine my passion and love for games, with my passion and love for information. Getting a Masters of Library and Information Science (LIS) opened up my eyes to the world of information, and it has been an easy step to see how much information can be conveyed through the world of video games. From general organizational aspects of games, gaming, and the people who game, to the construction, organization, and communication of individual games, the world of gaming, and especially video games, is ripe for the library and information world to take notice. The information environment for video games already exists and is robust, deep, and broad. Information professionals need to begin jumping into this world and getting their hands dirty.

While that is an anecdotal and personal rendition of why video games are important to both society and library and information science, there are many other reasons to spend time discussing video games, both in the context of society and within the context of library and information science. Because video games have become a ubiquitous form of media since the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century, it is important to spend time understanding them. There are fields dedicated to books, radio, television, and movies, and this needs to happen for video games as well. In actuality, it has already happened, it just needs to be moved forward faster, and in a much more well defined way. Video games have the ability to affect society much more than previous forms of media because of their interactive nature, and that needs to be taken advantage of.

To establish how video games are important and how they affect society, the first half of the book does not discuss library or information science almost at all. Because of the complex nature of video games, and the ways they can exist within society, there needs to be an understanding of the many different ways they affect individuals and groups. Chapter 1 provides a foundation by presenting the ways in which video games, and the people that play them, are organized. The chapter is not aiming to classify or categorize just for the sake of doing so, it is trying to find a way to provide a way to establish the differences in different groups of people, and different groups of games within the huge “gamer” culture. The millions of people that play games are all different in many, many ways, and being able to study, research, or talk about games requires knowing and understanding exactly what is being studied, researched, or talked about. While the definitions in the first chapter are not the be-all end-all of the classification and categorization of games and players, it is hoped to provide enough of a foundation or starting point that there can eventually be consensus, or additional research done to actually provide a good framework for studying games and players.

Chapter 2 is similar to Chapter 1, in that it is trying to help to define people that play video games, but rather than show the way to categorize the people, it discusses the different ways in which people can play video games. This chapter, rather than focusing on video games themselves, will focus much more on why individuals play video games. But, even more than that, it will also begin to show the impact that video games have on society at large, and how gaming can mean more than just playing the games themselves. Video games are great fun to play, and the motivations that exist for playing them are many faceted. The outcomes of playing the games; the objects, activities and communities that come from the games themselves are just as complicated, so understanding what they are is an important step in being able to understand video games as a culture, rather than just an activity.
The third chapter moves into the realm of gaming communication and how video game players communicate. Gaming communication is extremely nuanced and difficult to understand, especially because it exists within a technological world, and comes with all of the issues brought up in Chapters 1 and 2: differences depending on what game, who is playing, how it is being played, etc. Because of these issues, communication needs to be thought of from many different directions. First gaming needs to be understood as a unique subculture, or even many different subcultures, that have unique ways of communicating. Some of these unique ways of communicating are just part of being a subculture, but some of them are because of the loss of nonverbal communication when trying to communicate in a fast paced textual format.

Once the idea of the difficulties and differences in communication help provide a foundation to understanding game player communication, it is a matter of understanding how actual groups of game players function; how the communication works. In the world of information science, this can be thought of as information behavior, understanding the information environment, or the information exchange between individuals. Understanding all of the different pieces to the information environment for gaming is important to being able to understand the communication patterns of game players, because it can be completely different if any of the variables are changed.

Chapter 4 is about how video games can affect the health of individuals or groups, mainly focusing on the research that has been done in this area. This chapter is not meant as a comprehensive look at everything that video games can or should do regarding health. It is meant as an informative look at the different ways in which research is currently being conducted to see what kinds of effects video games are having in relation to the health of individuals (or groups). There is a wide array of topics in this chapter, and each section could be its own chapter, or even its own book, depending on the topic, so each subject area houses a small amount of examples for how video games are currently being studied or have been studied in relation to a health issue. The idea here for a broad view, not a deep view. Many of the studies are widely cited amongst other, similar, research, but are not meant to be the only answer, they are just good starting points, and exist to provide context and a point of view that video games can and do have a large effect the physical, mental, and cognitive processes of humans.

Chapter 5 focuses on the impacts that video games have upon society as a whole. This chapter will speak about three separate topics that have to do with video games and their impact upon society, and one topic that is related, but exists within video games. The first will be violence, and whether or not video games influence violent behavior. In addition to the discussion on violence is a related discussion of the behavior of players within video games, how to analyze it, and how to improve it. Secondly, addiction and its relation to video games will be discussed. Last of all, video games will be discussed in relation to free speech and censorship.

Chapter 6 takes the idea of video games and their impact upon society to a different level, to a governmental and legal level. Governments of all kinds have different relationships with video games. Within the United States, the primary focus of this chapter, the problems tend to rotate around copyright. Along with copyright, many of the issues are also involved with the First Amendment, and how liberal video games can be with content, and who can or cannot consume that content. The majority of the discussion on consumption of content was discussed in Chapter 5, but there are few additional pieces that need to be discussed here, because they relate directly to laws that have been passed in the U.S.
Outside of the United States, there is one country that is much further ahead (or behind, depending on the view) on legislating different issues related to video games, and that country is South Korea. South Korea has passed a number of laws aimed at how people play and consume video games. In addition to South Korea, Australia will be briefly mentioned because of their somewhat unique situation with video games, labeling, and censorship.

Chapter 7 begins the second half of the book. The first half of this book has set up a solid foundation for what will be talked about in the second half. Setting the stage and understanding the wide scope in which video games can be viewed is important to being able to discuss the intricacies of what can be improved upon with video games and library and information science. Without a deep knowledge of the video game world, it is much more difficult to understand how to interact with the different games and players of those games, much less to be able to dissect them at a much more granular level. With the many different aspects of video games discussed in the first half, it is now much easier to focus specifically on how library and information science can be more involved in the world of video games. The shared understanding of terminology, culture and ideas surrounding video games will be crucial to the discussions that happen in the second half of the book; please keep them in mind while reading the second half.

Chapter 8 takes a step away from libraries for the brief look into education, and how video games can be used for educational purposes. Chapter 7 discusses video games as related to literacy and education, and how libraries fit in, but that was a broad strokes overview of how games can be looked at for general skills or education. This chapter is different because it looks specifically at how video games can promote different types of learning and education. This is important to think of and acknowledge, from different points of view within the video game world, because games that are not intended to be educational can have those benefits. At the same time, it is important for educators, and librarians and information professionals, to understand how video games work in regards to education because it is closely linked to the world of information and how individuals process information and gain skills. Without the knowledge of how video games can enhance (or hurt) education, video games can be used in the wrong ways, at the wrong times, or to wonderful effect.

Chapter 9 is about the practical applications of video games in libraries. There are a lot of practical considerations to having video games in a library. There are also many different ways a library can decide to implement video games. However the gaming is implemented, whether as a collection or as a program, there must be a need driving the implementation, as well as policy (e.g. Mission statements) that can help guide the direction of how the video games are being used. This chapter will discuss some foundational ways collection development and video game programs should be set up within a library, and then show some examples of libraries that are doing this well.

Chapter 10 moves much deeper into the realm of information science, working specifically with information seeking behavior of individuals and groups within video games. Information behavior is the opposite side of the chapter on gaming and health. Gaming and health is how video games influence and/or affect changes in an individual (hurt or harm). Information behavior is how the individual reacts with the game, and can affect the game, or interacts with the game; collecting information from the game, and how that happens. The trick here is trying to understand the motivations or processes for why individuals (players) actually play games, what activities they perform while playing games, how they go about those activities, and for what purpose. Understanding the information behavior of game players is important for more fully understanding game players as a subculture.
Chapter 11 looks at the idea of user centered design and user experience in relation to video games. This chapter at first glance may seem to be a little out of place from the others, but the concept of focusing on the user/patron/player is a common theme throughout the whole book. It is important, no matter the setting, to build from the point of view of both the system being built, and the user, no matter whether the user is a library user, a video game player, or a participant in a study. The same goes for designing a system; that system could be a library program, collection development policy, a new research study, or even a new video game. User centered design is essential to all of those activities.

If there is one idea to be taken from this book, it is to make sure that the entire information environment is understood. This is many faceted, and difficult to do, but it is important. Each chapter within this book talks about a different factor (or factors) in the information environment in relation to video games, and each is important, and must be considered. In the end, gaming and its many different components (at least the ones talked about in this book), can be broken down into the actual differences in games, gaming, and players, the different ways that gaming impacts other areas of life, including outside activities and different parts of society, and then from understanding that landscape, determining what can be changed and improved upon in the video game information environment.

This book specifically makes it mark by arguing for two key points throughout the book: an understanding of both video games and users, and designing systems of all kinds from a user-centered perspective. That is not to say that this is not currently being done, but it is currently being done in a siloed fashion. Gaming and health research is operating in a different environment than video game research is operating, which is still separate from library and information science. There needs to be work done to bring all of this together and define a common set of terms and vocabulary so that the work being done in relation to video games can be more generalizable.

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