

Emma Cross, Cataloguing Games

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Emma: So, my experience through Super Mario comes with playing with my daughter as she was growing up and she is a devilish good player and both me and my husband were consistently beaten by her.

McKenzie: Hello and welcome. I am McKenzie Johnson and I will be your host for this episode. Today we are talking about video game collections in libraries, particularly academic libraries and joining me to talk about that is Emma Cross. Now before we get started could you just introduce yourself a bit further and tell us who you are and what you do?

Emma: Okay, so I'm Emma Cross and I work at Carlton University Library where I am a cataloguing and metadata librarian and I've worked there since 2005.

McKenzie: With that then, what is some of the work that you have done regarding games collections in libraries?

Emma: Certainly, I can do that, but I'd just like to start by defining what I mean by a game collection. So, it involves console video games, online video games and board games which libraries incorporate into their collection to be borrowed. So, I would like to point to two main things; so first of all, I've published in the field. In 2015 I published a peer review paper on games in the academic library sector. So that was co-written with two colleagues, one of which is a computer science professor at Carlton and the paper specifically discusses game collections in the academic library sector. Also, in 2015, I was part of a larger group of cataloguers who worked on a best practice guide for cataloguing video games. So, this was published by OLAC which is the Online Audiovisual Cataloguers Association and in the cataloguing community that is the expert group for audiovisual materials. Then secondly, I've presented a number of conference sessions on the issue of game collections.

I've co-presented three conference sessions at the Ontario Library Association conference and I also did something really fun which in 2015 we did something that we called the Game Zone on the conference trade

show floor and it was a conference session where we had a display of games and we had our most popular short play games. So, we wanted people to come and try the games and also we wanted to talk to them about the value of board games in library collections.

McKenzie: You mentioned the article you wrote and co-authored with some of the other members of the Carlton faculty. What drove your interest into games collections and the cataloguing practices surrounding them?

Emma: Basically, the Carlton library has been collecting games since 2009 to support course in game development. So in 2009, a large box of video games were dropped off at my desk and I was asked to start cataloguing them. At that time there were no best practice guides so I had to just try and it figure out. So I wanted to help other cataloguers who were in the same position but more importantly not to have cataloguing be a barrier to libraries collecting games. I just find it to be fascinating; the whole area of gaming developed so quickly, but also how it's being used in universities for both teaching and research is fascinating as well.

McKenzie: What were some of these gaps in the cataloguing practices that you felt you needed to fill as you were initially starting the cataloguing and then following into your later works?

Emma: So in general, cataloguing a console video game is somewhat similar to cataloguing a DVD. However, there are some issues specific to games that can raise questions so cataloguers are often presented with a wide variety of numbering both on the container and the disc itself. So this is U.P.C. codes, publisher numbers – so knowing what these are and the appropriate way to record them helps where to take the title from. Sometimes it isn't clear whether it's from the disc or the container or the instruction booklet. Franchised titles; are they sub-titles or are they parts, are they neither. So some popular games are issued as part of a franchise, which can be a bit confusing. Also the issue of platform is – often libraries buy the same title for different platforms, so how to clearly record this; is it Xbox, Wii, PlayStation? So yes, so there are a number of questions for cataloguers that are specific to games.

McKenzie: As is befitting the title of this podcast I must ask, So what? Why would you say your research is important?

Emma: Okay. Well, thank you. I think that's a great question because this points to a much bigger issue that academic libraries have to keep up to date with the needs of faculty and students and this research helps academic libraries provide access to new and different types of resources to support teaching and research on campus. So, it helps libraries to think beyond books and journals for their collection and there's a number of benefits for this for academic libraries. It supports faculty who are working in game development and game studies. It also supports teaching and learning outside these areas and can offer some interesting new possibilities. So for instance at Carlton, our Women's Studies Department offers a course on the portrayal of women in video games

and they have used our collection and also the library's gaming lab as well. So as a new generation of faculty enter universities, I think that they might be more interested and open to including games in their curriculum.

Also, I would just add that at Carlton, games were at the start for us and it paved the way for other developments as well. So it paved the way for our emerging technology collection so we now purchase and catalogue a collection of 85 items of technology such as Raspberry Pi and VR, Headsets. So it was the start of a development for us in the way that we collected materials at the library.

McKenzie: Do video games really need their own best practices for cataloguing?

Emma: So I would say, yes they do. I mean I did talk earlier about some issues that are specific to our games but there are more than that. So, once you start looking at games there are some complexities. A big one is system requirements, so putting in the record which kinds of console you need is important. A big issue is audience. So video games have their own content rating system and it is important and definitely suggested as best practice to include the ESRB rating, both in the record and not covering up on the container as well. If you have a mature 17+ content in a video game, it is a best practice to record that. There's also issues like performance credits, statistic and technical credit credits and of course, the RDA instructions factor into this as well. So when RDA came into effect in 2013 then there was a bit of confusion about the content media carrier and also the appropriate relationship designators as well. Also a best practice guide fills a knowledge gap in the field as well.

Cataloguers – and I don't wish to generalize, but cataloguers in general are not people who are familiar with video games. So this guide helps them get to know and explain a new format, explain some of the concepts they might not be familiar with and again, it just prevents cataloguing being a barrier to collecting a new format.

McKenzie: While acknowledging that your work is primarily focused on games collections in academic libraries, do you have anything to say about any of your work's applicability to public libraries?

Emma: Well in terms of the cataloguing best practice guide, so I would say that that is directly relevant because public libraries also catalogue this material. But I do have to add that in many cases public libraries have been working with games a lot longer than the academic sector. So I have called colleagues in the Ottawa public library system for ideas, advice on issues such as shelving, labelling, loan periods and their input and suggestions were key for us as we developed our own collection.

McKenzie: So what advice do you have then for libraries – academic or public – who are looking to integrate games of any kind into their collection?

Emma: So I would suggest that things will go more smoothly if you have a plan. So, I would start by looking at the library literature and there is an increasing number of publications that address the issue of gaming in libraries. I would suggest maybe also having a collections policy as well. Budgets are limited so some decisions will have to be made about which platforms your library wants to purchase games for, if they want to buy consoles or not. I would also suggest maybe trying reaching out and contacting somebody who's already working with games. Definitely a phone call but if you can also do a site visit as well, that can be very valuable to actually see how the collection functions can be very instructive. And the library community is generally happy to help and I have certainly both asked questions of my colleagues at other libraries but I've also answered questions, hosted site visits. So people are happy to help.

McKenzie: Based on your experience then, what might be some of the biggest challenges in creating a games collection?

Emma: So at Carlton, one of our issues that we found to be a real challenge was shelving and we went through several iterations of providing service through shelving. But now we have settled on the old video store model where we have the empty case on the shelf so it's visible and it's browsable, but you actually borrow the game through the course reserves route. Some other challenges are; games and gaming is a fast moving field so keeping up to date with changes can be a challenge. So virtual reality, augmented reality as well, they are now an important part of gaming and to provide them a service in those fields is more complicated and can also be expensive. Then of course the issue of consoles and related equipment, there are some challenges around thinking about if libraries need to circulate these to make the collection accessible.

McKenzie: In the article that you had co-authored with your fellow colleagues at Carlton, you had mentioned that the collections had faced some controversy over some of the graphic content and potential censorship within some of the games in your collection. Having faced that, what would you recommend to others who might be facing similar situations?

Emma: So I would suggest having that libraries should have a challenged materials in the library policy and have a procedure worked out for handling complaints. It is useful if the policy is posted on the library website so if and when a complaint arises, somebody can be directed to the policy straight away. I know at Carlton we actively participate in the Freedom To Read Week events that we want to develop a culture in the library of academic freedom and intellectual freedom as well. But I have to say, back in 2008, the idea of video games in an academic library was somewhat controversial but I have to say 10 years later, I just don't think it's quite as controversial as it once was.

McKenzie: Now, looking more at your cataloguing work and your work with the video games best practices for cataloguing, what were some of the biggest challenges in developing those best practices?

- Emma: Well, in terms of the work of the committee which put the best practice guide together, it actually went very well. It was nine cataloguers from across the U.S. and Canada but we worked through conference calls, we had a shared document in a Google drive and it was a very welcome chance for me to work with such a knowledgeable group of people who were not only excellent cataloguers but were also familiar with gaming and we seemed to get a lot done very quickly so there were no real challenges there. The main issue I think are the RDA rule changes so there's going to be – in June this year, there's going to be a major change to RDA and this is the result of the RDA restructuring project. So all best practice guides for cataloguing will probably need to be revised, not just this one. So yes, I think that's the main challenge; is keeping best practice guides up to date in a metadata environment that is frequently changing.
- McKenzie: So does the video game best practices taskforce still exist in any capacity?
- Emma: I understand that it was formed just to work on this best practice guide and I don't think it's operating right now. I think the cataloguing community is waiting. So the new RDA toolkit is going to be rolled out in mid-June and I think the cataloguing community is waiting for these changes and to start working with them before they think about moving forward on any more best practice guides.
- McKenzie: When that initial box of video games was placed in front of you 10 years ago, what was your initial reaction in like having those put in front of you and asked to catalogue them?
- Emma: I was like "Hey, this is great. It's interesting, it's something different, it's something new." I was quite enthusiastic. I was pleased to get them. So it was an opportunity for the library to do something new that wasn't being done in many other academic libraries. So I was happy to get that box at my desk.
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