The University of North Carolina at Greensboro - Department of Information, Library, and Research Sciences

Building a Foundation to Collect Independent Digital Games in Libraries

Introduction: UNCG requests $148,787 to conduct research, hold a national forum, and convene working groups to chart a path forward for collecting independent-made (indie) digital video games in libraries. Video games are enormously popular and widely recognized as a vital part of today's cultural heritage, and indie games provide experiences that critically reflect on our current moment from diverse perspectives. In recent years, the gaming industry has embraced digital distribution channels rather than the release of games on physical media; libraries have not kept pace and currently lack methods to collect, preserve, and provide access to digital games. This project addresses NLG objectives 3.2 and 5.1, by encouraging innovative and collaborative approaches to collect an emerging body of digital cultural materials.

Project justification: Librarians recognize that video game collections serve a range of patron needs, from entertainment to serious study,[1] and both academic and public libraries have long collected video games released on physical media (e.g. CD-ROM, cartridges) to support these needs. However, games are increasingly released through digital distribution methods designed around commercial licenses for single users. Indie game developers have benefited from the growth of digital game stores like Steam and Itch.io to reach wider audiences, but these platforms do not currently accommodate collecting in libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions. A 2021 report from the market research firm Video Game Insights highlights the growing significance of indie games: 40% of all units sold on Steam are indie titles, representing 28% of Steam's revenue, which has topped $7 billion annually.[2] While the sales data demonstrates the popularity of indie games in a multi-billion dollar industry, indie games are also an important body of digital cultural heritage, representing experiences not found in major commercial games and warranting inclusion in both academic and public libraries. Pragmatically, libraries will likely find it easier to establish working relationships with indie developers than with major commercial publishers in the near term. A longer-term outcome of this research will be to collect all manner of digital games in libraries, and collecting indie digital games will establish a necessary foundation.

Libraries have developed strategies for collecting and providing access to ebooks, digital video, and other e-resources through a combination of working with established vendors and licensing works directly from copyright holders, but similar strategies do not currently exist for digital games. As academic programs in game studies continue to grow in popularity, academic libraries will need to develop digital game collections to support teaching and scholarship.[3] A study of 400 public libraries found that 78% supported gaming in some way;[4] public libraries will likewise need to develop digital game collections to continue supporting their communities' interests in gaming. To move forward in developing these new strategies to broaden access and lay the pathway for preserving this emerging area of cultural production, libraries need to develop a shared understanding of their needs as institutional collectors and to begin discussing these issues in relation to the needs and interests of other stakeholder communities. A Forum Grant will provide an ideal venue for bringing these different groups together and initiating this conversation.

Project work plan: The project consists of three phases to be carried out over the course of two years. The first phase (8 months) will consist of conducting research to better understand the issues critical to collecting digital games in libraries from the perspective of five central stakeholder groups: academic and public librarians, indie game developers and publishers, game studies and game design scholars and students, legal experts in electronic resource licensing and technology policy, and library vendors of ebooks, journals, and digital video. The PI will conduct semi-structured interviews (virtually via videoconferencing software) with approximately 10 participants from each group for a total of about 50 interviews. Through a pilot study preceding the current project proposal, the PI has identified individuals representing academic libraries (University of North Texas, University of Miami, Temple, University of Utah, Brigham Young University, DePaul, the University of Delaware, and the University of Oregon), experts in legal and policy issues (Software Preservation Network), and indie game publishers and developers (Choice of Games, the Interactive Fiction Technology Foundation) interested in participating in all phases of the project; further recruitment efforts will engage public librarians, game studies and game design scholars and students, e-resource vendors, and a broader range of indie game developers. The PI will use situational analysis, a grounded theory research method that facilitates holistic understandings of the many sociocultural, legal, and economic factors shaping complex social phenomena, to analyze this

---

[1] Adams, Suellen. 2009. "The Case for Video Games in Libraries." *Library Review* 58 (3): 196–202.

[2] "Indie Games Make up 40% of All Units Sold on Steam." 2021. Video Game Insights. https://vginsights.com/insights/article/indie-games-make-up-40-of-all-units-sold-on-steam.

[3] Ferguson, Christine. 2016. "Ready Librarian One." *Serials Review* 42 (1): 42–46.

[4] Nicholson, Scott. 2009. "Go Back to Start: Gathering Baseline Data about Gaming in Libraries." *Library Review* 58 (3): 203–14.

data to surface the major questions and points of tension among different stakeholder groups that will need to be addressed in the forum and working groups. A graduate student research assistant from the UNCG MLIS program will help to support study recruitment, data collection and management, analysis, and reporting.

In phase 2 (8 months), the findings from the research will be used to structure a national forum around key issues critical for collecting digital games in libraries. 10 participants identified in phase 1 representing the different stakeholder groups will be invited to lead the forum: each forum leader will give a talk highlighting the importance and challenges involved in collecting digital games from their perspective; forum leaders will moderate breakout group discussions open to all forum attendees focused on key questions raised in the invited talks. The forum will take place over two days (approximately 5 invited talks and 1 breakout discussion session per day) and will be held virtually to encourage broad accessibility. The forum will be free to attend (up to 150 registrants); announcements to attend the forum will be shared through professional mailing lists (e.g. Digital Library Federation, the ALA Gaming Roundtable). The goals of the forum will be to articulate to a diverse audience the importance of collecting digital games in libraries, outline the major issues, and begin making the connections across these stakeholder groups needed to take collective action to address these issues.

In phase 3 (8 months), the PI and forum leaders will constitute two working groups tasked with building on the key issues raised in the forum to develop concrete products that will catalyze libraries to take next steps in collecting digital games. One working group will further examine legal aspects and develop model licenses for collecting digital games tailored for different types of libraries; a second working group will examine sociotechnical aspects and develop a technical roadmap for the infrastructure needed for libraries to collect and provide access to digital games in libraries. A call for participating in the working groups will be distributed directly to participants from phases 1 and 2 as well as through professional mailing lists; prospective participants will submit brief applications detailing their expertise and interest in contributing to one of the two working groups. Each working group will comprise approximately five members and will consist of at least two librarians and two indie game developers, with priority given to librarians directly working with video game or other electronic resource collection management. The PI and forum leaders will review the applications and vote on the composition of the working groups; forum leaders will be eligible to serve on the working groups but must recuse themselves from reviewing and voting on their own applications.

Diversity Plan: The project will represent a diversity of libraries, in terms of type of library, geographic location, size, and community served. In focusing on indie digital games, the project aims to engage game developers from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and other identity categories. Representation across these categories will be a criterium in recruitment for all research phases. A code of conduct ensuring an equitable and inclusive environment will be developed and adopted for both the forum and working groups.

Project Results: In phase 1, the PI will report on the findings of the research in the form of a peer-reviewed article published in a journal with significant impact aimed at a broad audience of librarians (e.g. *The Library Quarterly*) and presentations at two conferences (one attended by a large, diverse group of librarians like the ALA Annual Conference and one attended by indie game developers like the Game Developers Conference). For phase 2, the invited talks and summaries of group discussions will be compiled into conference proceedings that will document the key takeaways for libraries as they begin to develop strategies for working with various stakeholder groups to collect digital games. Phase 3 will result in two products that will facilitate the collection of digital games in libraries: a technical roadmap for developing a shared platform for libraries to host digital games, and model licenses for collecting indie digital games in different kinds of libraries. The products from phases 2 and 3 will be permanently hosted and made freely available via the UNCG Institutional Repository and will be widely shared via mailing lists for professional associations.

Overall, the project will promote a deeper understanding of the current state of collecting indie digital games in libraries and lay the foundation for developing collective strategies for tackling these challenges in academic and public libraries. As with other once-new forms of cultural heritage that are now widely collected, libraries need to adapt existing practices and develop novel approaches in order to build collections of indie digital games that will serve the needs of both present and future library users. The outcomes of the project represent necessary first steps: by encouraging discourse among diverse stakeholder groups and producing concrete plans for next steps, this project will foster communities of practice prepared to advance this issue.

Budget Summary: The estimated budget for the 2-year project is $148,787 (d+i). Personnel: $36,271 PI effort for both years (fringe included); Travel: $3,000 for PI to attend professional conference for dissemination; Student Support: $21,808 for a Graduate Research Assistant; Other Costs: $1,000 for conference/forum platform and $47,000 for forum leader and working group participant stipends; Indirect Costs: $39,708.