

An Empty Bag of Holding: The RPG Information Community and Information Organizations

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Abstract

In this paper the author examines the roleplaying game (RPG) player information community. The academic literature on the subject is lacking, with most research focused simply on the collection of RPG books in libraries or on introducing information professionals to the concept of RPGs for use in library programming. The RPG player information community practices diverse information behaviors: using their hobby's books as reference books, engaging in extensive online discussion, and even piracy of the RPG books. Right now, libraries are not meeting the information needs of this community, and the literature is not in a good place to determine those needs on an academic level. The level of discourse about RPGs and their players in academic circles will need to be raised to help determine the exact needs of the community beyond the obvious (access to books and other resources). Meanwhile, libraries will need to embrace resources such as free PDFs that aren't provided by vendors in order to start meeting the RPG player information community's information needs.

Keywords: Information Community, Information Behavior, Information Needs, Roleplaying Games, Collection Building, Piracy

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Introduction

In this paper we examine the information community of tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) players. For our purposes this will be a wide definition including players all along the intensity spectrum as well as players who also create games. These are players that play tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, or any other game that involves roleplaying and is primarily analog in nature. These games involve several players and, usually, at least one player acting as Game Master: someone who acts as a referee, controls any non-player characters, and provides the players with story hooks and controls how the game world reacts to the players' actions.

A study of this group is significant because they fill a unique information niche and are generally underserved by libraries and other information organizations. RPG players still heavily use printed materials to pursue their hobby, but also have a large internet presence. Despite this reliance on printed materials, libraries do a poor job of meeting their needs, circulating very few of the books they need to engage in their hobby (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015).

I will start by reviewing the academic literature related to RPG players and information science, primarily focused on libraries. After that, there will be a discussion of the methodology used to gather information about RPG players and their information behaviors and needs, followed by a discussion of what I found in my research.

Literature Review

The literature on tabletop RPG players as an information community is very limited. Video games, a related medium, are well-researched, but this level of study has not been extended to tabletop games.

Scott Nicholson is one of the most prolific writers about games in libraries. But even then, when studying games he doesn't cover RPGs as their own categories, putting them under board/card games while video games have a more in-depth taxonomy (Nicholson, 2009). He does point out that most libraries think of games as electronic only, indicating that libraries may simply not think of tabletop RPGs when discussing games (Nicholson, 2009). Nicholson does discuss roleplaying games in his history of gaming in libraries (Nicholson, 2013), and devotes a section of his book to tabletop roleplaying games, as well (Nicholson, 2010). Neither of these sources go into any particular depth on the issue.

Both of these sources share an issue with many of the others I have reviewed: they focus on introducing libraries to the basic concept of tabletop roleplaying games, instead of going in-depth on the information communities and behaviors related to those games. Vos, Nicholson, and Snow all give very simple collection-building advice about tabletop RPGs, discussing what they are and suggesting that librarians could implement them into their programming (Vos, 2012) (Nicholson, 2010) (Snow, 2008). This glut of basic material on the topic of the games themselves means that the information community formed around those games, and its needs, are obscured.

The few papers that do go more in-depth about RPGs tend towards quantitative analysis and primarily relate to libraries' collection management practices. Sich discusses the various RPG publishing formats, and how copyright and licensing issues can cause issues for libraries trying to add RPGs to their collections (Sich, 2012). Schneider and Hutchison, meanwhile, focus on how many libraries have these books in their catalogues (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). These papers do also briefly discuss the information behavior of RPG players, however, discussing piracy (Sich, 2012), and how RPG books are used like reference texts (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). This use of books like reference texts indicates that they are used as part of

everyday life information seeking, especially ELIS in the context of way of life, letting us bring in that concept's literature, such as Savolainen's writing on the topic (Savolainen, 2009).

To find more information on RPG players as an information community, I researched a major forum mentioned in Snow's work, RPG.net, and used that to study RPG player information behavior as it relates to forum use (Snow, 2008). This proved much more fruitful for information behavior literature. Irvine-Smith's (2010) discussion of the "information neighborhood" proves to be a particularly relevant concept, as the RPG forums function as a social space where RPG players are likely to stumble across useful information. Here we also see the use of other players' expertise by individuals to avoid the need to do extensive research, as discussed in Khoo's work (Khoo, 2014).

As evidenced in this literature review, there are large gaps in the academic literature about RPG players as an information community. Most of the papers that specifically address RPGs focus solely on quantitative methods, evaluating the presence of RPG books in library collections, or are about introducing RPGs to librarians and/or into library programming. There seems to be a bias towards treating RPGs solely as a collection issue, and not examining the information community around them, or that community's information needs and behaviors. This lack of information about the information community and its needs/behaviors is a major weakness of the literature that needs to be addressed if an in-depth study of RPG players as an information community is to be attempted.

Methodology

The information for this paper was gathered by searching the scholarly literature as catalogued in the San Jose State University's journal article collection. I especially focused on the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Texts database, as well as

the Library Literature & Information Science Full Text database, as I wanted information that would focus on the RPG player community's information behavior as well as how they are served (or not) by information organizations. This was conducted using keyword and subject searches for terms such as "roleplaying game" or "RPG." Upon finding articles that felt particularly relevant, like *Referencing the Imaginary* by Schneider and Hutchison (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015), I would look at the articles they referenced and read through those that looked useful for relevant material. I also referenced papers and articles I had previously read for this class that seemed like they would be a good fit.

For community resources, I relied on my own experience to find sources, with a special emphasis on the sources mentioned in scholarly articles. For example, I knew that RPG.net was a major source of information for the community, and it was mentioned in *Dragons in the Stacks* by Snow, as well (Snow, 2008). In order to further explore the sorts of information behavior these sites enabled, I then took the general format (forum), and looked for scholarly research related to that communication format in the databases mentioned above. In the community resources area I focused primarily on forums, using RPG.net as my point of reference. I also researched books that were professionally published but hadn't undergone a traditional peer review process, such as *Designers & Dragons*, which could easily be considered scholarly but fall into the grey area between formal academic study and a professional source.

After further research, and finding references to the piracy of RPG PDFs both in the literature (Sich, 2012) and observing it in my own experience, I did some additional research on that topic. This included both a look at the steps publishers take to prevent piracy (Blankfield & Stevenson, 2012), and research into how libraries manage their electronic book collections, especially integrating public domain and other free material (Hill & Bossaller, 2013). This

allowed for a more thorough consideration of both the issue of piracy as a behavior in the RPG information community and gave me another angle on the lack of RPG books present in library collections.

Discussion

After surveying the various resources that the RPG player information community uses to meet its needs, I found myself with several conclusions about its information-seeking behavior. RPG players tend to use information resources to solve specific, smaller problems. They try to answer specific questions with the resources available to them, spot-checking as they go along rather than demanding a comprehensive set of answers, though exceptions do exist. The community is not particularly picky about the legality of the sources available to them. Also, the community does very much embrace technology's enhancing of their ability to share information, using a variety of online mediums to request and share information.

The first major information-seeking behavior to be aware of with RPG players is the tendency for them to search out information in a reference-like way, looking up the answers to specific questions within a source rather than consuming an entire source. (This is comparable to looking up a fact in an almanac versus reading a book about a subject.) This is traceable to the fact that RPG books, the core of the hobby, are laid out and used like reference books, meeting Rugh's definition of a reference work (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). RPG players will reference the books to answer rules questions or find out information about a setting, using the books as a way to explore the mechanics and worlds of the games, but do not tend to read them solely for pleasure. This matches with Rugh's idea, presented in *Referencing the Imaginary*, that "readers choose reference materials because they choose to use the information, rather than simply enjoying the book for itself" (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015).

This use of RPG texts as reference texts ties into everyday life information seeking, especially Savolainen's concept of the context of way of life. During play, RPG players are unlikely to reference the book unless they have a specific question. This can range from a rules clarification to looking up a detail of a setting or a plot point for an adventure. This state of play, where all necessary rules and details are known to the participants, can be seen as a normal cognitive order (Savolainen, 2009). However, when information is suddenly lacking, this cognitive order is disrupted, and the RPG player is required to take active care to restore it to its normal state. To do this, they reference the RPG book, gaining the information they need and participating in mastery of life (Savolainen, 2009). The cognitive order is thus restored to normal, and play can proceed.

Despite most RPG books acting as reference books, there are examples of works related to RPGs that RPG players would engage with simply for the enjoyment of the work itself, rather than only quickly referencing the information within. In my observation, for non-fiction books side these tend to be written about the hobby as a whole rather than about the worlds of the games. For example, the *Designers & Dragons* books by Shannon Appelcline cover an in-depth history of the industry, providing few game mechanics but giving insight into the evolution of the games and the industry that creates them over the years (Appelcline, 2014). There are also books like *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-Help for Elf-Help*, by Shelly Mezzanoble, a humorous memoir where Mezzanoble attempts to apply a Dungeons & Dragons mentality to her daily life as a form of self-improvement (Mezzanoble, 2011). These provide evidence of meta-texts that RPG gamers would read just for the pleasure of the work itself, not just for the information contained within,

as the information within is not directly relevant to the mechanics and gameplay of a particular game. This is an alternate information behavior to the reference behavior outlined above.

We also see reference-like behavior in the online world of RPG gamers. I used RPG.net as my primary source for observing the online behavior of the RPG player information community, due to its popularity and citation in scholarly sources such as *Dragons in the Stacks* (Snow, 2008). Many of the threads on the forum were asking for help with specific questions. For example: historical information to help with worldbuilding (Toxoplasma, 2016), gathering opinions about things players liked in the games they played (TheShadow, 2016), game mechanic preferences (Vivsavage, 2016), and how to manage the presence of technology at the gaming table (DestinyPlayer, 2016). Answers provided by other players were a quick and concentrated source of information, much like referencing a fact in a book.

RPG players to take advantage of online technology for other purposes, as well. They use forums to play online with each other, engaging in collaborative and creative play that often follows the rules of a particular game system agreed upon by the players in advance. For example, there are several play-by-post threads on the RPG.net forum (“RPGnet Forums,” 2016). These forums are also used for selling and purchasing game materials from other members of the community, and host discussions about creating RPGs, working in RPGs, and about related media like books and TV shows (“RPGnet Forums,” 2016).

These forums act as “information neighborhoods” for the community, a social space where they are likely to stumble across useful information (Irvine-Smith, 2010). The large number of threads dedicated to answering a specific question (DestinyPlayer, 2016) (DeusExBiotica, 2016) (Toxoplasma, 2016) or determining preferences (TheShadow, 2016) demonstrate that RPG player information community members, like many forum users, are likely

to value another human's information and expertise (Khoo, 2014). They use the expertise of others to avoid needing to do extensive research and synthesis on their own (Khoo, 2014), saving time and allowing for a ripple benefit where others looking for that information in the future will be able to find the archived forum thread and have their questions answered immediately.

There is a dark side to RPG players' use of online technology, in the form of piracy. PDFs of RPG books are freely (if illegally) downloadable from many sites on the internet, and many RPG gamers engage in this behavior. This is partially enabled by weak protections of the part of publishers. While I personally find a lack of digital rights management, which allows users to freely use the digital materials purchased, admirable, in this case it makes the PDFs very easy to share illegally. Most RPG PDF purchasing websites rely on what Blankfield and Stevenson (2012) call social DRM, where in this case the PDF is watermarked with the purchaser's name and a unique identifying number. However, social DRM does not necessarily discourage piracy, and one individual can engage in good faith sharing of their purchase with family and friends only to have one of those individuals post it to a pirate site to be shared far and wide (Blankfield & Stevenson, 2012). This makes it difficult for publishers to hold those who illegally share the PDF accountable, as they can easily trace the original purchaser, but that person might not be the one who shared the book illegally (Blankfield & Stevenson, 2012).

This common practice in the RPG player community of piracy can be traced to a number of causes, including the relatively high price of RPG books (which regularly cost \$50 or more in print), but one of the factors most germane to our discussion is the dearth of RPG books in library collections. The average library in the United States stocks zero RPG books (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). This is likely due to a number of factors, but publishers do make the libraries' job any easier in this regard. Large RPG download sites, where the books can be purchased as

PDFs, have restrictive licenses that only allow for use of the book by a single individual (Sich, 2012). This renders those PDFs unsuitable for library collections. To deal with this, Sich (2012) recommends that libraries purchase print versions of materials, or download free PDFs.

However, while many games are available as legal, free PDFs, and some are even under clearly defined creative commons licenses (like *Eclipse Phase* by Posthuman Studios (“Creative Commons,” n.d.)), these games are often only available as individual downloads. Libraries have shown a lack of interest in adding free materials to their collections, especially materials that do not already come in large bundles (Hill & Bossaller, 2013). This makes it unlikely that free PDFs are a practical alternative to libraries being able to purchase PDFs (preferably from a vendor), unless attitudes drastically change. And with budget cuts, Sich’s proposed solution of purchasing print books may also prove impractical.

Conclusion

In my research I found that there is very little in the academic literature about RPG players as an information community, with few papers even mentioning their information needs or behaviors. Most of the writing in the academic literature focus solely on introducing librarians to the use of RPGs in library programming and adding them to the collection, or do quantitative analysis of the presence of RPG books in library collections. Those writings that do touch on the information behaviors of RPG players tend to only do so briefly as part of addressing other topics.

The lack of writing on the information needs and behaviors of the RPG information community means that there is little apparent understanding of how to meet the information needs of RPG players. This leads to the conclusion that the information community’s needs are not being well met, especially in the realm of library services. This point of view is reinforced by

the severe under-circulation of RPG books in public libraries, with the average library having zero books in their collections (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). Libraries may have trouble addressing this collection gap, as well, given the restrictive licensing of RPG PDFs (Sich, 2012), and the lack of interest in collecting free PDFs that aren't pre-bundled by various vendors or other organizations (Hill & Bossaller, 2013). That RPG players are driven to piracy on a semi-regular basis would also seem to indicate that they are not able to meet their information needs through legal methods, a gap that libraries would do well to address.

In the future, libraries and other information organizations have much they can do to ensure that the information needs of the RPG player information community are met. I think developing a focus on RPGs that are available digitally and for free, with nonrestrictive licenses, would be a great way to increase the presence of RPGs in library collections with little cost. Ample online resources, such as these ebooks, would also mesh well with the propensity of tabletop RPG players to use online resources, in spite of the mostly analog nature of their hobby. Developing programming and other services that introduce large numbers of people to RPGs could also help meet the information needs of RPG players in the long term, by reaching a critical mass of people, including academics and information professionals, that are aware of the hobby. This would allow research to push past introducing information professionals to the very concept of RPGs and instead create more interest and space for academic literature that delves deep into the information needs and behaviors of the RPG player community.

RPG players as an information community have needs that are relatively simple, but are currently failing to be met. Only by pushing ourselves further in understanding their needs, in spite of the challenges, will we truly be able to support them as an information community. We need to move beyond the anemic presence of RPGs in libraries and into a mode that embraces

free PDFs and fights for changes to be made in RPG PDF licensing. Then, along with other changes, we can make available the wide variety of resources the RPG player information community needs and ensure their information needs are met.

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