Stuck at Level One: A Literature Review Regarding the RPG Enthusiast Information Community

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Abstract

The RPG enthusiast information community engages with a major part of popular culture, tabletop RPGs. However, there is limited academic study of the community. What papers about roleplaying games do exist tend to focus on them as an issue of collection-building in libraries, instead of the community itself. Using certain information sources preferred by the RPG community as a jumping off point, we can find other sources of insight into their information needs and behavior. However, the academic literature still proves very limited and incapable of providing much insight into the roleplaying game enthusiast community.

Keywords: Information Community, Roleplaying Games, Literature Review

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Introduction

The information community I've chosen to study is fans/enthusiasts of roleplaying games (RPGs). This includes both people who solely play the games in the role of player or game master, as well as fans who create their own games, often based off of a commercially available game. Studying their information behavior can provide significant insight into how individuals engage with games as fans. RPGs also have the unique quality of being games that are almost entirely analogue in nature. This can favor different forms of information behavior as opposed to purely electronic games like *Call of Duty* or *World of Warcraft.*

The literature available on the RPG enthusiast information community is anemic, however, mostly focusing on RPGs in libraries from a collection-building perspective; focusing on the books the RPG enthusiast information community uses, not the information community proper. Tabletop RPGs are also not discussed much in the literature about games in libraries, often lumped in with board and card games or ignored entirely in favor of electronic games. We'll discuss the articles about roleplaying games available in the literature and how they apply to the information behaviors of the community, as well as related literature. The current state of the literature will also be critically evaluated, with gaps identified and suggestions of areas that need further study.

Literature Review

There is a surprising dearth of academic literature available on the RPG enthusiast community in the library/information science field, according to my searches. Despite video games being well-researched and discussed, the same has not been extended to roleplaying games and their players, with a few notable exceptions.

Games in libraries is a widely discussed topic, but trends mostly towards discussion of video games, with less discussion of tabletop games and even less of tabletop roleplaying games. Due to the nature of this literature review, I mostly examined scholarly writings. One of the most prolific academic writers on the topic in my research is Scott Nicholson. For example, Nicholson, in his survey about games in library, doesn't break out tabletop roleplaying games into their own category. Instead they are likely lumped under "Board/Card Games" (Nicholson, 2009). Meanwhile, electronic games are categorized between PC, console, and handheld games (Nicholson, 2009). However, Nicholson does point out that when surveyed, most libraries thought of gaming in libraries as only referring to console (electronic) games, and not considering the full breadth of the term, which would include roleplaying games (Nicholson, 2009).

Nicholson also wrote a history of gaming in libraries, and it's here that we see our first glimmer of a mention of roleplaying games (Nicholson, 2013). They are mentioned as an aside in the history of games in libraries, especially ironic as tabletop roleplaying games have been around for years longer than home consoles.

Nicholson does devote a full section of his book, *Everyone Plays at the Library: Creating Great Gaming Experiences for All Ages* to the topic of tabletop roleplaying games (Nicholson, 2010). However, this shares an issue with several of the other papers reviewed. The vast majority of the articles I looked at focus solely on introducing librarians to the concept of tabletop roleplaying games, with very few going into any meaningful depth on the issue or discussing the specific needs of tabletop RPG enthusiasts as an information community. 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.

Even the papers that go more in-depth on RPGs stick to a quantitative analysis of the games and how they relate to libraries, and tend towards a collection management approach. However, these can still get at the information community's needs, albeit obliquely. Sich does an excellent job of this in *Dungeons and Downloads* (Sich, 2012). Sich discusses the various publishing formats of tabletop roleplaying games, including the prevalence of PDFs and the copyright issues those cause when a library attempts to purchase and circulate them (Sich, 2012). This examination gives us an idea of the breadth of media types that the RPG enthusiast information community needs access to in an ideal situation.

The best paper that directly discusses the information behavior and needs is Schneider and Hutchison's *Referencing the Imaginary: An Analysis of Library Collection of Role-laying Game Materials* (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). Here they discuss how most RPG books are used as reference texts, giving us insight into the needs of the RPG enthusiast community (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). We learn that these books will need to be frequently referenced during games, and so libraries will need to circulate copies in order for them to be used effectively (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). This idea of using RPG books as reference (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015), feeds into ideas about everyday life information seeking, specifically ELIS in the context of way of life (Savolainen, 2009). *Referencing the Imaginary* also gives us an idea of how many libraries actually have copies of these books on hand. It turns out that, on average, any given library in the United States has zero books from a list of popular roleplaying games (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). This highlights that any information needs from the RPG enthusiast information community are unlikely to be met by public libraries as

they exist now, simply due to a lack of materials. This could indicate that, for now, RPG

enthusiasts are more likely to engage in information behaviors that take them away from libraries

and into private stores, online venues, or to gain their materials through piracy (Sich, 2012).

All of this information primarily covers the what and why of RPGs as they relate to

libraries, however. In order to find information on the actual information community, especially

its behaviors, we have to travel further afield. In his paper, Snow mentions RPG.net, a website

I've also uncovered in my own research (Snow, 2008). This website is a forum, with RPG

enthusiasts discussing numerous topics, most tangentially related to RPGs. Using this as a

springboard, we can uncover more academic literature that will point us towards the

community's information behaviors and information needs. There are a number of excellent

academic papers on the information behaviors of individuals on forums and through social

media. From these works we can determine that RPG enthusiasts who choose to use forums as a

primary source of information may be using them as an "information neighborhood," that is, a

social space where they're likely to stumble across useful information (Irvine-Smith, 2010). We

also know that forum-users are likely to value another human's information on their question,

and that these users (in our case RPG enthusiasts) can use the other users' expertise to avoid

needing to do extensive research and synthesis on their own (Khoo, 2014). While these sources

are not directly related to the RPG enthusiast information community, they do a good job of

helping us examine its behavior, especially absent studies specifically geared towards the

community.

This sample of the literature leads us to some interesting insights. First is that very few

people have written prolifically on the topic of tabletop roleplaying games in libraries, much less

the tabletop RPG enthusiast information community. Nicholson is the only one to have more

than one paper (Nicholson, 2009) (Nicholson, 2013), and Schneider & Hutchison, the author pair whose article gives us the most insight into the information community, have not written another paper on the topic. This means that we are left with a very incomplete survey of the RPG information community, and that the literature is devoid of diverse points of view on the issue. The lack of volume of articles also means there hasn't been an opportunity for various schools of thought to develop. While almost all the papers were enthusiastic about the idea of RPGs in libraries, as part of the collection or as part of programming, their coverage of the community was paltry at best. This starves the critical theory about the community of the basic amount of information it needs for an academic discussion to truly develop. There were also no controversies that I could determine, although this is likely in part due to the focus on collection building as opposed to trying to determine best practices or studying the behavior of the information community directly. By primarily engaging with primary documents (the RPG books themselves) instead of with the RPG enthusiast information community, these papers have robbed themselves of the opportunity to take strong stances on how the community functions.

Most papers used quantitative methodologies when they engaged in any sort of study at all. Most of the articles in the literature didn't engage in gathering information about RPGs in libraries or the information community, instead content to evaluate various RPGs and methods of programming through qualitative methods in the course of their introducing librarians to the genre (Snow, 2008) (Vos, 2012) (Sich, 2012) (Nicholson, 2010). The other articles engaged in surveys to gather their information, a time-tested quantitative method. Schneider & Hutchison searched/surveyed worldwide library catalogues to determine how many libraries had relevant RPG books, and engaged in statistical analysis of the results (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015). Nicholson used phone and internet surveys to gather information about gaming programs in

libraries (Nicholson, 2009). Both of these methods provided interesting quantitative data that could be applied to studying the RPG enthusiast information community, by examining the availability of material and programs in libraries that help them meet their information needs.

Almost all of these articles approached the issue of RPGs in libraries from a collection-building angle. This keeps the focus on the material and unfortunately means they don't need to engage in discussing the RPG enthusiast information community. Even *Referencing the Imagination*, despite its insights into how RPG books are actually used, kept itself focused strictly on the presence (or not) of RPG books in libraries and away from the information community who uses them (Schneider & Hutchison, 2015).

This homogeneity of both approach and content means that are enormous gaps in the literature about the RPG enthusiast information community. We have almost no literature that touches in any way on its information behaviors, and are left to imply information needs by looking at the websites the community frequents and the discussions and other content present there. While the current literature provides a good survey of popular RPG materials and how to utilize them in library programming, it does not examine the fans of the games to any significant degree. The bias towards treating RPGs in libraries as solely a collection building issue may be part of the reason why the study of the information community itself is so slight.

Conclusion

Given this review of the literature it's readily apparent that the RPG enthusiast information community is very sparsely studied in the information sciences. What mention it does get is derived from literature about RPGs in the context of collection-building and programming in libraries, which is primarily concerned with the physical materials and how to use them, not the information community surrounding them. Several areas need further study. It

would be good to find out more about how RPG enthusiasts engage with the books. How do they use them during play, how often do they reference them, what formats do they prefer, etc. Further study of their more general information behavior, where they go for what information, is also needed. This would be especially valuable to libraries because then they can figure out which materials are the best fits for their collection, determining their collection-building strategy based on the studied information needs of the community, instead of just basic knowledge about the hobby as a whole.

I believe that the academic literature can give us great insights into the RPG enthusiast information community in the future, but in its current state the information is severely limited, and even generalizing is of limited use. This shortcoming needs to be addressed if we are ever to develop novel insights into the RPG enthusiast information community.

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