Press Start to Begin

Reinvigorating Traditional Bibliography through World of Warcraft

Matthew Fesnak, Sara Klein, Jess Whyte

Abstract

In exploring the application of bibliographical tools to digital media, the authors saw a gap in the description of digital objects, and specifically in the description of video games. In our analysis we do not reject traditional bibliographical tools wholesale, but instead offer some recommendations for updating or reinvigorating those tools. We have used the popular game World of Warcraft as the object of bibliographic description, because of the proliferation of scholarship that exists about the game, its world, and its players.

Keywords: Bibliography, World of Warcraft, digital objects, citation, Fredson Bowers, bibliographical approach, bibliographical description, video games

Preserving the old ways from being abused,
Protecting the new ways for me and for you.
What more can we do?

- The Kinks, “The Village Green Preservation Society”

While the field of bibliography has come far to embrace non-traditional formats, tools of bibliographic description have not progressed so quickly. This lack of change is especially concerning with regards to digital media, and particularly video games. In the course of our study, we found that the tools of bibliographic description are inadequate when applied to objects and abilities in video games, which leads to a lack of specificity when referring to ingame objects. While the principles of twentieth century bibliography provide us with a foundation for understanding video games like World of Warcraft (WoW), bibliographic methods do not adequately meet the requirements of video games
as a medium. Therefore, we are on a quest to defeat the main bosses of bibliography via a review of WoW fansites. This paper will explain why an improved bibliography for video games in particular is necessary, survey and assess possible new models of bibliography for objects, and examine challenges posed by the integration of traditional and newer models.

To be clear, we agree with the general principles of traditional bibliography and that adherence to those principles would lend credence and authority to any new bibliographic format. As David Gants (2010) puts it, "any initiative that seeks to understand the expansion of tenets into the digital domain should build upon the existing methodologies designed for the study of physical books" (p. 121). But we take issue with the neglect of new objects of study and, to illustrate this, we will use the world's most popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), WoW, as our case study.

We ask: why is it acceptable to have weaker or nonspecific descriptions of digital objects? We agree with Nathan Altice (2015) when he says, "at their best, videogame citations adhere to the barest enumerative models" (p. 333), but we also seek to take this argument further to make game bibliography a useful tool for both scholars and players. Our focus, therefore, is objects in games, because while referring to video games with a modicum of specificity is difficult, so too is attempting to describe or refer to a specific object within a game. This does not mean that challenge should be avoided. Philip Brey (2003) captures the problem well when describing the ontologies of these virtual worlds; he writes, "just like the real world, virtual worlds have an ontology, meaning that entities encountered in them have a mode of existence that may be analyzed. Before such an ontological analysis can be performed, it must first be clear what entities are found in virtual worlds at all" (p. 276).

**Why Do Game Objects Need their Own Descriptive Bibliography?**

If the goal of descriptive bibliography is to identify "books as physical objects, so that a person who has never seen a particular book before can recognize it from a written description presented in a systematic fashion" (Harmon, 1982, p. 110), we argue that purpose can and should be extended to levels, objects, abilities, or opportunities within games if bibliography is to be useful to both scholars and players.

Game scholarship needs a bibliographic intervention (Altice, 2015, Appendix A). Searching Google Scholar for *World of Warcraft* returns over 17,000 results. These results include anthropological research (Nardi, 2010), identity studies (Martin, 2012), textual interpretation, religious analysis (Geraci, 2014), critical anthologies (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008), ontological attempts (Elverdam & Aarseth, 2007), and more. Delving into these results, you will notice a pattern: of the top 20 results, sorted by number of times cited, only three include a reference to the game itself and none mention version, patch numbers, or specific objects or abilities within the game, even if they were referenced in the article (search done on December 6, 2015). In their argument for a standard game classification model as a way of furthering scholarship, Elverdam and Aarseth (2007) bemoan the tendency to “talk about games with implicit or informal references to all possible aspects of games,” and argue that “this poses
a problem if we, theorists and practitioners alike, want to communicate with at least some precision” (p. 3). Despite their call for specificity, Elverdam and Aarseth (2007) fail to formally reference any of the games or in-game objects they use as examples in this article (p. 22). This lack of reference or identification is a common problem in game scholarship.

The second group in need of specific and accurate description are players. For them, bibliography is a well-used tool, though it is rarely referred to by name. Player needs are immediate and particular, and explain why players frequent external websites: they do so for advice, value assessments, strategy, comparisons across versions, and to better understand game narrative and lore (Thorne, Fischer & Lu, 2012, p. 282). In a Dutch and American study of players, all respondents reported using external websites, which are essentially bibliographies, in order to further their gameplay (Thorne, Fischer & Lu, 2012, p. 284). The organic development of popular websites like Wowhead or MMODB, which aim to provide both enumerative and descriptive bibliographical entries for everything in WoW, is a testimony to both those players’ needs and their subsequent granularity. Martin (2012) describes these community-generated bibliographies as “constellations of information that surround the game” (p. 389). In the absence of formal bibliography, these community-led initiatives have created their own methodologies.

Has This Been Done Before?

Scholars and players have attempted bibliographic description of video games with varying degrees of success. Enumerative bibliography has barely started to gain a foothold. The Chicago Manual of Style offers no method for citing video games (Chicago Manual of Style Online, n.d.), the APA only provides one for software (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.), and MLA offers no official method, but rule-bending examples are available (Alfano, 2011).

Descriptive or analytical bibliography for scholarly application has also been attempted, but never widely adopted. Below are examples of attempts that range from enumerative to descriptive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Game Bibliographical Entry</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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Whether a game takes 20 minutes to complete or offers years of never-ending gameplay, you can see how the omission of specificity (the “page numbers” of the game, if you will) could create problems for anyone wanting to locate or replicate a particular gameplay experience. However, there are some communities attempting the challenge. To illustrate this, we will look at a series of models from player communities:

Table 2: Examples of Player-Made Bibliography

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<th>Community</th>
<th>Bibliographical Features</th>
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| Wowhead                    | • Provides a changelog for objects or abilities. Players can compare across expansions, builds, patches, and fixes.  
• Uses external evidence (code mining) to identify changes or errors in the game.  
• Provides location of objects or abilities (based on faction, class, level, and actual location within the game world/map).  
• Tracks variant states of objects or abilities.                                                                                                           |
| MMODDB                     | • Utilizes player cache files to find new objects, creatures, or quests in the game or to update entries.  
• Less concerned with tracking versions or editions of objects.                                                                                              |
| Wikipedia Editors’ Citation Template | • Provides for edition, version, and platform.  
• Uses ID, ISSN, EAN, or JAN to denote impression and potentially state.  
• Allows for notation of series, chapter, level, or characters.  
• Other than “other” field, does not include specification for objects, abilities, or opportunities.                                                        |
How Are Player Models Better than Traditional Bibliographic Methods?

We believe traditional descriptive bibliography can benefit from new models in three ways. First, these new models are fluid while still concerned with tracking changes in state making them well-used tools, which both explains and defends their success. Secondly, the new models of bibliography utilize technology in keeping with their medium. Finally, their makeup and design reflect their medium in its social, linked, and modular infrastructure by utilizing social epistemology and leveraging it for both accuracy and adoption.

Concerning the first point, player community models are better suited to the medium of video games because they are able to reflect the ever-changing nature of games, and are therefore more accurate than more traditional methods. They are designed for active use by those who are interacting with the digital objects in real time. External websites are, according to Thorne, Fischer and Lu (2012), “not only a preparatory or post hoc evaluative process, but also an integral part of the moment-by-moment gaming experience” (p. 287). Unlike traditional bibliography, player bibliographies are not merely a reference tool that gauges authenticity or compares edition and state; users actively engage with these bibliographies as they interact with the objects in the games.

Second, community bibliographies’ use of current technology and methods is in keeping with the medium, but also allows these bibliographies to be more efficient and applicable for players. Bowers (1994) proposes that descriptive bibliography acts as a compromise for having the book in hand (p. 26). By utilizing methods like screen grabs, videos, or images of the objects in question, tools like Wowhead or Wowdb seek to do the same thing, and they do so in a manner that is more appropriate and useful for their communities. While photocopied or current computer-generated reproductions are not perfect, digital technologies that enable capturing and sharing content have dramatically improved over the past decade. New technologies enable bibliographers to include details about texts and objects that transcription alone cannot adequately capture.

Bowers (1994) may still be correct to assert that “it is open to doubt whether photographed titles will ever in the future so completely displace transcriptions that the formulation of rules for making transcriptions will prove a useless procedure” (p. 135), but by including images, icons, hyperlinks, and comment sections, contemporary WoW bibliographers are able to communicate their work to the wider community with ease. Traditionally, discussions between bibliographers often happened between the publishing of bibliographies, which at the very least would take a year for any kind of conversation to unfold (Juliar, 1986, p. 110). For example, Juliar discusses other Nabokov bibliographies and his efforts to correct them. The other bibliographies came out years prior and Juliar’s published comments give no opportunity for the other authors to reply without publishing their own book or journal, and even then a reader would need to gather all of the books in order to see the discussion unfold. With today’s online forums, mistakes can be called out and decisions can be defended instantaneously.

Finally, these new models mimic their mediums by utilizing social epistemology. In her history
of the Internet, Janet Abbate (1999) makes the argument that the networked infrastructure of
the web extends to its use and the applications that best replicate that network are rewarded with
adoption (p. 4). Christine Borgman (2003) builds on this with the idea that networks, by nature,
increase interactions and the most successful interactions are those that mimic their networks (p. 32).
Essentially, communities of video-game players prefer applications or uses of bibliography that are
social, linked, and modular. The static, solitary nature of traditional bibliographic methods is therefore
unsuited to the dynamic medium of games or to its active community base. Thanks to patches and
expansions, games change regularly. Players and scholars respond to interactive, online descriptions
that are updated along with the game and vetted through the process of social epistemology.

Social epistemology1 may seem like a contentious mode to ensure authenticity, and yet systems of
internal checks and balances emerge in online communities when accuracy of information is involved.
Looking at the comment sections on Wowhead.com is a great example of social epistemology at work
and shows what happens when we involve the community at large in bibliographic work—more
knowledge, more information, equitable accuracy, more ‘detective work,’ and better fact compilation
and knowledge production. Traditionally, academic work by single authors, or groups of scholars, is
valued when it comes to “taking things seriously”—this is one of the places where bibliography seems
to have lagged as well. As with other fields of study, single-authorship has become related to purity or
value-free ideals. The theory of social epistemology challenges the view that those ideals are created
in a vacuum; compare that to a hypothetical world where millions of people could interact with and
report on Shakespeare’s First Folio every day, each one with the ability to support existing findings
or report new ones. Certainly, this is not without its problems, but these are often addressed by the
community – other “bibliographers” (users) examining the same object, or controls that can be put
in place by administrators (such as banning malicious users). This is the benefit to adding a social
epistemology to the work of bibliography—a proliferation of viewpoints and enhanced fact finding.

Did We Encounter Any Monsters on our Bibliographic Quest?

We ran into three challenges when trying to consider the application of traditional bibliography
to objects within games, which exposes the limitations of bibliography when applied to newer forms
of texts. The first is how one interprets variation in the ever changing world of gameplay. The second
is transcription and its shortcomings as a way of capturing gameplay. The third is how to answer
questions of authorship or intention.

WoW has had an incredible number of players throughout its long history—so much so that the game
has its own unofficial census (“World of Warcraft census,” 2015). This is problematic for bibliographic

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1For more on this term, see Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry, Helen E.
Longino
description because if the principles of bibliography state “a basic task of the analytical bibliographer is to determine what level of difference is of potential significance in a particular instance” (Tanselle, 1980, p. 18), a bibliographer would potentially have to sift through each of the millions of installed copies of WoW played on countless different machines, in order to produce something beginning to resemble a comprehensive bibliography of the game. The principles of bibliography are practical and executable in cases where there are only a handful or a few hundred variations on a text available to transcribe and collate, but when that number enters the millions—and when there are aspects of the game that are significantly different for individual players—being strict about what must be included or considered in a bibliography does not make sense. However, because videogames are iterative, like books, they can still be studied for their variations if one is willing to create boundaries. Bibliographers following W.W. Greg and Fredson Bowers’ principles work without being interested in one particular copy of a book, but with groups of variations between different editions, issues, impressions, and states. Many copies of a single text are gathered in order to determine their differences, reflecting the way that versions of spells, abilities, objects, and areas are compared to each other on Wowhead.

With video games, tasks akin to collation are not easily done, as players can play in completely different ways, experience completely different things, and have much more divergent understandings of the narrative or progress of the game. As Roland Barthes (2010) says, “we know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space” (p. 1325). What should come first, what should go last, and so on, in a bibliography of video games, or of elements in video games, will not be comprehensible to players who do not make sense of the game in the same way as the bibliographer assumes for traditional texts.

Finally, there are questions of authorship and intention that are complicated by massive development teams numbering in the hundreds or thousands. For video games, meaning is not only in the scripted content, but also in the way that people move through the world and interact with objects, as well as the technical elements attributed to non-authorial actors like developer teams. There are of course games with single actors working as writer, coder, producer, and most of everything else, such as Jonathan Blow (2008) with Braid, but these are rare cases. Either way, the textual object itself lives in the world separately from its creators. Barthes (2010) reminds us: “as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intrinsically, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (p. 1322). For video games, writing takes on an expanded significance, as lines of code take on new—and sometimes unpredictable—meanings when executed.

**How Did We Defeat These Monsters?**

We did not, but we think player community bibliographies are getting close. Writing about the future of bibliographical analysis, David Vander Meulen (2008) writes, “as Alston points out,
Gaskell (whose book was first published in 1972) maintains a ‘dignified silence’ on events after 1950. His volume ends without covering offset printing, phototypesetting, photocopying, or computer-generated texts” (p. 17). By avoiding all of these modes of book production, Gaskell (as a representative of bibliography in the 1970s) is also avoiding doing bibliographic work about mass-produced texts, and neglecting their audiences. In a world where the internet is more than just a military project, as in Gaskell’s time, bibliography is something that has become much more participatory. Companies and fan sites like Wowhead work towards organizing and describing bibliographies of countless ingame objects, finding difficulties agreeing with each other and with other websites on how to approach video game bibliography without ever realizing or considering Gaskell, Bowers, or W.W. Greg’s methods. Video games have massive user bases, many of which are interested in describing and analyzing the variation and transmission of contemporary texts, but attempting to enforce a rigorous application of standardized practices may only lead to being trolled and ignored.

Wowhead requires a medium-sized company to produce its bibliography of WoW. Unlike bibliographic work for books, it may be impossible for an individual scholar to produce work of quality and accuracy on a single, large game, and an individual scholar may not even produce anything that many gamers would care about. Because this work is done by organizations and by groups of fans, rather than through academic channels, a standardized method has not and likely will not emerge. The community aspects of WoW bibliography, as exemplified by Wowhead, all but assures that bibliography will be able to adapt to new forms of texts and new modes of transmission, even if it is not done under the name of bibliography. A large database acting as a bibliography (as in Wowhead) may not be able to reproduce the feeling of playing through different patches and editions of WoW and its objects and abilities, but it does help to maintain a record of some of the context of the game, and assists in making sense of the world and ensuring authenticity. Walter Benjamin (1968), in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” writes that “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” and that “it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (p. 223). Bibliography of video games and video game objects, as Wowhead does, helps place games in their historical, ritual context, especially when so many WoW players are involved in the process. Using Wowhead can never replace the experience of playing the game, but provides the detailed historicity of the uses, contexts, and consequences of ingame objects, abilities, questlines, and so on through its descriptive bibliography.

Perhaps arguing for bibliographic description of objects or abilities within the games, rather than simply the game as a broad whole, seems excessive. However, video games often have divergent modes of engagement and providing a detailed bibliography of the objects used by players to act within the world can provide users with more information and understanding than their own engagement with the text is able to provide. Describing the many different ways to read Nabokov’s *Pale Fire,*
including from cover to cover, ‘warping’ between sections, and giving up, Andrew Ferguson (2013) says: “though some of these textual encounters will likely prove more pedagogically productive than others, nonetheless they are all valid modes of engaging with the playerly text—which, if it is to cohere at all, can only do so as the sum total of all such interactions, even (or especially) those which seem failed or abortive” (p. 101116). Like a postmodern or poststructuralist novel, video games can be very open ended, requiring a different kind of bibliographic scholarship. Wowhead has proven that a database format with many user inputs, as well as paid contributors and moderators, is a potentially better way to produce bibliographies for twenty-first century texts. There are still many other games other than WoW that could use a similar database, while more games still could potentially use an entirely different model.

The End Game

In 1993, at the beginning of proliferation of computer technology and the digital world, D.F. McKenzie urged the Bibliographic Society to meet a challenge:

The demands made of bibliography and textual criticism by the evolution of texts in such [computer-generated] forms, the speed with which versions are displaced one by another, and the question of their authority, are no less compelling than those we accept for printed books. By the logic of our discipline, we’re equally committed to acknowledge that these textual artefacts also embody the conditions of their construction. Devising means to describe, order, and conserve them, however, is by no means easy. It may indeed prove impossible. (McKenzie, 1993, p. 27)

We agree with his sentiment, but we differ on the impossibility of the project. So much is already being done in this field, but not by bibliographers. In parallel, so much scholarship is happening on digital items and worlds that do not correctly identify or refer in any accurate way to the actual artefacts being discussed. Authors have reverted this desire for hyperspecificity and authenticity by describing user experiences of the digital representation rather than the functioning of the game itself. This does, at face value, seem to expound this as impossible: we are not even at the “inspect the chain lines” phase of digital bibliography, in fact, we do not even have a field for it yet. Despite this disparity, as discussed above, trends in production are absolutely a good principle to use when thinking about this. As are the principles of correctly identifying edition, state, and other specific principles of traditional bibliography. We want to squash the rumour that the bibliographic paradigm is over by reinvigorating the field with new methods to enact these principles, specifically those that encourage and embrace social epistemological methods.

While we respect their contributions, we are interested in proposing new avenues and opportunities for bibliographers to make a difference. As Thorpe (1972) writes, “the bibliographers have had strong
leadership; their spokesmen have agitated with some success for a closed shop, and their claims have been loud and frequent" (p. 80). We believe it is time to open up the shop for new models of bibliographic work.

References


