Digital Games Referencing: Guidelines towards a more useful shared standard

Executive summary

There is currently no consensus on how researchers should cite digital games. This paper outlines current practices and efforts to develop citation systems for games. The main issues that need to be discussed in developing a citation standard are: what needs to be included in a citation, how (or whether) authorship should be attributed, the differing functions of game citation in different fields, and whether games should appear alongside other cited works in a separate reference list (sometimes called a 'ludography').

Problem statement

Digital game citation has a number of functions in game research and scholarship. Digital game citations:

- help readers find games that are the object of analysis so that claims can be verified or findings replicated;
- help readers find particular 'moments' in games such as specific levels, actions, boss fights or narrative scenes (Lowood et al., 2017);
- allow authors to give credit to game developers;
- make it easier to find scholarship on specific games;
- enable large-scale scientometric analyses of game scholarship based on game citation;
- establish a 'trace' (Gualeni et al., 2019) of transient or ephemeral games and game performances;
- describe specific material features of game cartridges, ROMs, disks, etc.

However, there is currently no consensus on how digital games ought to be cited in academic publications. While some journals and publishers do offer guidelines on this matter, these guidelines are not followed consistently (Olsson, 2013) and the principles they are based on are not always clearly explained. A lack of standardization has led to huge variation in how digital games are cited and indeed whether they are cited at all. This variation undermines many of the functions outlined above.

The main referencing systems are beginning to develop guidance on digital game

citation, but this is happening in a piecemeal manner without wide consultation with scholars who will be using these citation systems in their work. This may lead to systems that do not consider the needs of different scholars researching and studying digital games.

This report is part of a larger project that aims to establish the relevant issues when developing recommendations, requirements or guidance on how to cite digital games. This may or may not lead to a single standard for digital game citation, but it will at least serve as a guide for authors, editors and publishers seeking to develop a sensible citation system for their own publications or (sub)fields. The immediate aim of this report is to serve as a platform for discussion at a DiGRA 2023 workshop on game citation.

The report itself outlines some of the challenges and controversies that anyone wishing to develop a digital game citation standard must reckon with. This is followed by a list of elements that are commonly used in citations, and an explanation of when they are relevant. The report then describes current practices and some efforts to establish digital game citation guidelines. These current practices are included here as concrete examples or templates that will, we hope, inspire and guide discussion about the form that a game citation standard might take.

Throughout the report, the term 'game citation' should be taken to refer exclusively to digital game citation, as this report focuses on citation of digital games, not other sorts of games (for example, boardgames, tabletop games, live-action role-playing games, and traditional sports). While some of the discussion related to digital games may apply to other sorts of games, other aspects may be less relevant, and there are issues regarding these other games that are not so relevant to digital games. In the interest of clarity, therefore, the report focuses exclusively on digital games. For the purpose of this report, we take the term 'digital games' to be broadly synonymous with videogames and computer games, with games on PC, console, and mobile as the most typical examples.

Scholars' opinions on game citation

To understand the sorts of issues that game scholars feel are important in game citation we conducted a short questionnaire survey in February 2020. The link for the survey was publicized on the Games Network and ECREA mailing lists, as well as our own social networks. We also contacted individual editors of journals and commissioning editors at publishing houses that publish game studies work.

There were a total of 71 responses. However, because this is a small, self-selecting sample, largely representing scholars in game studies and/or communications disciplines, we cannot extrapolate from these results to attitudes toward citation amongst game scholars more generally. However, the survey did surface some issues that game citation needs to take account of.

- **Game citation is important.** 97% of our sample agreed on this point, with about the same number thinking it was very important or moderately important that publishers provide guidance and enforce citation standards.
- **Date, developer and publisher** were seen as the most important pieces of information to include in a game citation.
- There was considerable disagreement about who should be considered a **game's author**. Some argued that collaboratively produced products such as games should bear the company's name as author; others felt that this played into an industry narrative that robbed designers of their due credit. Authorship is clearly not just a technical but also a political aspect of game citation (Gualeni et al., 2019).
- Some suggested including **aspects of gameplay** in the citation (e.g. number of hours played, number of players, house rules or modifications). This points to the question of whether scholars cite a particular piece of software or a particular run-through or 'performance' of that software.
- **Different disciplines have different needs**. Respondents from information studies and computer science tended to see information such as platform, version, and file format as important to include, while those in other fields did not.
- Several respondents were comfortable with a **flexible citation system**, with some basic information included in all citations, but other information only included if relevant to the way the game is being used in the article or book (see, e.g. Kaltman et al., 2021).
- Another point of contention related to **ludographies**. 42% of respondents felt games should have their own ludography; 42% felt they should be included alongside other sorts of texts in the main references or bibliography section.

The remainder (7%) felt there was no need to include games at the end of the text.

Elements of citation

Theoretically, a game citation could contain a large quantity of information that would help a reader locate the game that the citing author played. Some of this information will be relevant in one situation, but not in another. For example, a scholar discussing the linguistic content of a game may want to include the language setting used when playing the game. This information may be irrelevant to a scholar discussing game mechanics. We provide here a list of potential citation details along with the sort of situation where such information may be useful.

- **Game developer**: As indicated above, this may refer to an individual or a company. It is likely that all citations will include some information about 'who' developed the game.
- **Version:** This may be relevant if the citing author is discussing material only featuring in the original release of a game, or, alternatively, only available in a subsequent version, for example an anniversary or 'GOTY' edition (see Young, 2016).
- **Year**: This may refer to the year the game was originally released, or the year the particular version of the game played by the citing author was released. For games that are frequently patched or are provided as an ongoing service, it may even refer to the year (or more precise date) on which the citing author played the game. An original release date may be most relevant in a discussion of a game's history, but the date of the relevant patch might be more appropriate if the citing author is discussing content only available, or available for the first time, with this patch.
- **Game title:** This is likely to be relevant to all citations. It may be necessary to discuss how to cite a game series (e.g. the *Mass Effect* series) as opposed to a single entry in that series (e.g. *Mass Effect 3*).
- **Platform:** Gameplay and features may differ significantly between PC, console and mobile versions of a game. Where these elements are relevant

to the citing author's argument, it may be necessary to identify the platform on which the game was played.

- **Publisher:** This is likely only relevant where the discussion relates to the publication history of the game. However, citing authors may wish to credit the game publisher regardless of the content of the discussion.
- **Place of publication:** This is likely only relevant where the discussion relates to the publication history of the game.
- **Language:** Where the citing author is discussing linguistic content of the game, it may be important to know which language version the author played. Citing language version also helps to demonstrate the range of languages in which game scholarship takes place, thus challenging any Anglo-centric bias that may exist in game scholarship.
- **Type of game:** This report relates to digital games only. However, it may be useful in some instances to clearly indicate that the game is a digital game as opposed to, for example, a board game. This would be particularly useful in a discussion surveying a range of different types of games, where some titles appear as both digital and non-digital games.

Current practices

There have been a number of efforts to develop guidance and standardization of game citation. These have been developed by journal and book publishers, academic associations that develop specific reference styles, and individual scholars as authors.

Journals

Game Studies

Game Studies [current game citation guidelines](#) are derived from Gualeni et al. (2019), and allow for some modularity based on the information available about a game and its method of play. Game references are included with all other types of references in the "References" listing at the end of each article in the following form:

- Developer. (Version, Year) [Year of original release if different]. Title [Platform]. Digital game directed by director, published by publisher. Accessed month day, year if online only or streamed. URL if online only.

Game Studies also includes examples of references for games that are lacking a known version number, were played in a browser only, or through streaming. The journal also notes that "directed by" credits may be altered based on the individual responsible for the game and whether their role is more important to the reference.

Eludamos

Eludamos requires games to be included in a separate 'Games Cited' section at the end of the text. All other sources are put together in a 'References' section. Authors should follow the following format in the 'Games Cited' section:

- Developer (Year) *Game Title*. Publisher (Platform).

The submission template is available here:

[Eludamos_Style_Guide_2020_draft_14_sept_2022.docx (live.com)](live.com)

Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference

The 2023 DiGRA conference submission template requires the following format to be followed 'as closely as possible', and game references appear in a 'Bibliography' section along with all other sources:

- Developer/designer. Year. *Title*. Platform, Version. Release City, State, Country: Publisher.

The submission template also provides requirements for in-text citation: "For games, set the game's name in italics with initial capitals. On first occurrence in the text, use the full game name and include developer and publication year in parenthesis, e.g. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004)."

On the question of authorship, the template gives some freedom for the citing author to choose: "Depending on the use of the game in the context of the article, you may also choose to refer to the principal designer(s), creator(s), and so on."

The submission template is available here: [DIGRA_Submission_Template_2023.docx (live.com)](live.com).

Individual scholars

Altice, 2015

In an appendix to his book on the NES/Famicom, Nathan Altice (2015, pp. 333-341) draws attention to the distinction between enumerative bibliography, which focuses on giving

readers enough information to locate a source, and analytical or descriptive bibliography, which includes much more detail about a text's physical properties and the process of its production. In the context of platform studies, he argues that a simple enumerative system of referencing is inadequate, since differences in the material properties of ROMs, cartridges and disks are frequently germane to the discussion. He gives the following two more elaborate enumerative citation versions, which he employs throughout the book:

Listing 1: Enumerative type for citing Famicom, NES, and compatible cartridges and disks.

- *Title*. Platform (media), TV format [Region]. Catalog ID (Form, Revision). PCB Class [Mapper | ROM1 size/type | ROM2 size/type | … | Lockout model | Mirroring]. Developer {Credits}: Publisher, Release date.

Listing 2: Enumerative type for citing Famicom, NES, and compatible ROMs/patches/save states used in emulation.

- *Original cartridge/disk title [Type]*. Author. "Filename and extension." File size. Mapper format: Mapper number. [File header in byte format]. Date modified. Emulator. < Download source>

Gualeni, Fassone and Linderoth, 2019

Gualeni et al. (2019) developed two styles of citation, depending on whether the citing author wishes to credit an individual designer or a developer as the 'author' of a game.

- RECOGNIZABLE AUTHORSHIP STYLE: Author. (Version, Year) [Year of original release if different]. Title [Platform]. Digital game developed by developer, published by publisher.
- DISTRIBUTED AUTHORSHIP STYLE: Developer. (Version, Year) [Year of original release if different]. Title [Platform]. Digital game directed by director, published by publisher.

This suggestion has granularity in addressing authorship (recognizable vs. distributed) but seems to require authors to cite a version, which may seem unnecessary in many cases. The argument for including version as a required component of a citation is that it becomes possible to assign a definite date to the digital game in question, making it more portable to DATE-focused style guides.

Kaltman, Mason and Wardrip-Fruin (2021)

Kaltman et al. (2021) provided an analysis of the historical citations present in the journal *Game Studies* and included an appendix detailing best practices for game references. They argued that game references need to provide enough information to support the arguments making use of them. This is grounded out in a discussion of "levels of access", in which the authors begin with a discussion of general game citations before also commenting on citation of location specific game performances, game modifications (mods), source code file and line references, and saved game states.

The recommendations note that Gualeni et al.'s (2019) recommendation citation formats are adequate for general game references, but that "authors should include the level of specificity in their references needed to validate the claims in their work." This would come in the form of additions to the standard citation format. The article notes that extended in-line citations mentioned in Gualeni et al. (2019) might work, as would an "extended footnotes" format similar to that used in the Chicago Manual of Style. There are also eight further best practice recommendations including the use of controlled vocabularies, standardizing citation to reduce scholarly burdens, and considering the political implications of attribution.

Reference Styles

Modern Language Association (MLA)

MLA identifies 'core elements' of a citation that can be applied across citations to different sorts of sources. As such, its handbook (Modern Language Association of America, 2016) does not provide a template for citing games. However, there is an article on its website with the following advice: "Provide any relevant information about the game provided by the version of it you are looking at. Of particular significance with video games is the version of the game and the platform on which the game is played." ("How do I cite a videogame?," 2017). It also suggests a way of identifying particular parts of a game in text with the following example:

> *Few* Donkey Kong *players reach the blue kill screen (level 22).*

The Chicago Manual of Style

The Chicago Manual of Style (2017) categorizes games under "audiovisual recordings and other multimedia". This category if citation "usually contains some or all of the following elements": the name of "the person primarily responsible for the content", including their designation; the title in italics; additional contributors; date of recording, publisher, date of publication, medium or format; additional relevant information; a URL if the source is online. While digital game titles appear in text in capitalized italics, other sorts of games appear in capitalized roman if trademarked (e.g. Monopoly) and lower-case roman if not trademarked (e.g. poker).

Conclusion

This white paper should be seen as a means of encouraging discussion about citation in game scholarship. Our intention is not to offer a definitive set of guidelines, but to identify the issues that need to be discussed in developing such guidelines. These issues include what information is most important to include, how to deal with the question of authorship, and the pros and cons of a separate ludography.

Reference list

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