

Natascha Karlova
HASTAC Scholar, 2011-2012
Doctoral Candidate, Information Science
University of Washington Information School
nkarlova@uw.edu

Position: Bring it on home!: Information use in games studies

Research from a variety of different domains energizes games studies, but the information science perspective offers a useful – yet underutilized – insight into the significance of information in games. For example, some education researchers seek to understand how education can be more ‘gameful’¹ (i.e., fun, playful) (Curry, 10; Lewis, 10). Some businesses try to ‘gamify’² their products to “use game mechanics to increase user engagement, loyalty and monetization” (bigdoor.com, 10). Some game designers create ‘health games’ (Brox, 11; Lange, 09) or ‘serious games’ to raise awareness among players about health or social issues. Military applications of videogame-like simulations generate disparaging comments about games and games studies broadly. In our own field, interesting work in archiving games (Winget, 08; Kraus, 11) underscores the cultural importance of the medium. While many of these domains have yielded fruitful collaborations, I have found success with a group of digital humanities scholars.

Sponsored by HASTAC and the Simpson Center for the Humanities, the ‘Keywords’ Graduate Interest Group (GIG) for Video Game Studies at the University of Washington meets twice per quarter. Each session focuses on a specific keyword topic (e.g., PLAY, GAMER, IMMERSION, POWER), anchored in pre-assigned literature. The ‘Keywords’ GIG was founded by digital humanities scholars, predominantly phd students from English, and offers a way of thinking that provides opportunities to ask and discuss questions about race, class, gender, power, infrastructure, meaning, etc. rarely asked in game/design communities.

To these video games discussions, I bring the information science perspective and its insights into the nature of design and information use. In games, information is often invisible to parents, scholars, and designers, but often ubiquitous to players. They appreciate the information saturation of many modern videogames (e.g., World of Warcraft (WOW), Starcraft II (SC2), Bioshock:Infinite, the Halo series). The information use research potential remains largely untapped, despite the huge volume and the many sources of information that constitute much of the challenge of these games. For example, to use information better, players harness available metadata about in-game objects (e.g., armor, weapons, maps, potions) to organize the enormous amounts of information required to advance in the game. In this way, players use information to maximize their enjoyment of the user experience.

As we study information needs, seeking, and use, we uncover nuanced understandings of how people experience systems, technological, infrastructural, and otherwise. This is why we ought to study games. As virtual, distributed, synchronous systems, such as those in WOW or SC2, become increasingly commonplace in libraries, classrooms, and conference rooms, the imperative grows to understand how people need, seek, and use information in these environments.

¹ <http://gameful.org/blog/2010/10/10/what-is-gameful/> ; Accessed 20110904

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamification> ; Accessed 20110903