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Preserving Game History at The Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games

Jon-Paul C. Dyson
The Strong Museum of Play

How should a museum study and preserve the history of video games? The Strong faced that question in 2006 when it began to build its collection of video games and related materials. In tackling this question, The Strong developed approaches that reflect its own particular nature and its engagement with broader trends in historiography and preservation. This experience offers a model for other institutions looking to collect, interpret, and preserve materials documenting the history of video games.

The Strong, located in Rochester, New York, is home to the National Museum of Play and owns and cares for the world's most comprehensive collection of playthings, including more than 400,000 toys, dolls, games, video games, and other items that document the history of play and how it has changed over the past several centuries (www.museumofplay.org). Almost 600,000 guests visit The Strong each year and experience exhibits on a wide array of subjects including the history of video games (*eGameRevolution*) and the history of non-electronic games and puzzles (*Game Time!*).

When The Strong first began systematically exploring the history of video games, it faced the challenge of how best to proceed. The Strong itself had gone through a critical period of evolution. The museum opened in 1982, but it did not formally adopt its play mission until 2003 (Adams, 142). Adopting this mission allowed the museum to focus on growing its already world-class play-related collections, and this resulted in the decision to build a

comprehensive collection documenting the history of video games to complement its collections of dolls, toys, and games. This led to the establishment of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG) at The Strong in 2009 (www.icheg.org).

At the time, few museums or libraries were collecting video games, so there were few strategic and intellectual models to follow. The Museum of the Moving Image (www.movingimage.us) in New York City had exhibited and interpreted the history of video games, but they had only a very small collection, in accordance with the museum's policy of collecting artifacts only for exhibition. The collection of the Computer History Museum (www.computerhistory.org) in Mountain View, California necessarily included computer games, but those constituted only low percentage of their overall collection. Stanford University, which had been bequeathed the Stephen M. Cabrinety Collection of early computer software, had the most extensive and intentional collecting effort of any library or archive. In Europe, the Computerspielemuseum (www.computerspielemuseum.de) had built a large collection, but at the time the Computerspielemuseum did not have a permanent space open to the public. The Strong needed to develop a plan that reflected both its own unique character and lessons learned from other collecting institutions of all subject matters.

In building the video game collection, The Strong staff made a number of decisions that guided the development of the collection. First, the museum defined the category of "video game" broadly to include "video games, computer games, console games, arcade games, handheld games, and toys that combine digital and traditional play." (Concentric Circles 1) Staff believed that these forms of play were all connected within the broader umbrella of "electronic games" (both conceptually and practically in terms of their manufacture and marketing) and that excluding certain types of games would be detrimental to the history. Second, the staff studied the historiography of existing subdisciplines of history to determine what sort of questions to ask and interpretive approaches to take. Most influential, in this respect, were the constructivist approach to the history of science (Golinski 6) and the wide view

that book historians have adapted that encompasses the production, dissemination, and consumption of a wide range of printed materials (Rubin 556). Drawing on these models, the staff stressed the importance of interpreting these materials through the lens of play and collecting not only video game products but also items that documented the work of video game producers and the experiences of video game players. These approaches were articulated in a white paper in 2008, "Concentric Circles: A Lens for Exploring the History of Electronic Games," that guided future efforts

(Concentric Circles 2). Third, because The Strong's mission is to explore play, the video game collections reflected this play mission; this separated ICHEG from other institutions that might look at the subject of video games primarily from the point of view of particular technologies, specific businesses, certain segments of the industry, or limited geographical regions.

Guided by these principles, ICHEG has grown enormously. Today the rapidly-growing collection consists of approximately 50,000 video games and related items that range from handhelds to computer software to game guides and game magazines. The collection encompasses not only personal gaming devices like computers, consoles, and handhelds, but also includes approximately 200 arcade and pinball games. Scholars are making particular use of ICHEG's collection of media that includes more than 10,000 computer and video game magazines, more than 1,000 game guides, and many other published documentary sources. ICHEG also hosts many rare and unique archival materials that document the history of the medium, including game design documents and other material from key industry figures such as Ralph Baer, Will Wright, and Ken and Roberta Williams. All of these items are available to researchers by appointment, and The Strong has started a fellowship program to support research in these collections.

In addition to making these materials available to scholars, The Strong has also mounted a series of exhibits on the history of video games. In 2010, the museum installed *eGameRevolution*, a 5,000 square-foot permanent exhibit on the history of video games; this is the first in a series of exhibits that will

eventually form four distinct segments of a larger interpretive space, *America at Play*, documenting the history of play in the United States. In 2013, the museum opened phase two, *Game Time!*, exploring the history of non-electronic games and puzzles. In addition to these permanent, comprehensive exhibits, the museum has also mounted displays of key new acquisitions (such as a large donation from the Microsoft Corporation) and created temporary exhibits. In the summer of 2013, *Atari by Design*: *From Concept to Creation* highlighted the museum's collection of concept art for Atari arcade cabinets and *Boardwalk Arcade* celebrated 100 years of arcade games, from Coney Island to modern redemption centers.

Hand in hand with collecting and interpreting, the museum also has worked to preserve video games. As observers such as James Newman have pointed out (121), video games present unique preservation challenges. Because they are immersive, interactive worlds they demand a level of participation not found in most cultural artifacts. Furthermore they often rely on technology that is subject not only to technological obsolescence but also rapid physical decay (sometimes labeled "bit rot"). As more and more games exist only in digital form and rely on servers and software remote from the end user, the long-term viability of these games becomes even more precarious (Lowood 140).

At the moment, The Strong employs five main strategies for preserving video games. First, the museum collects physical copies of the hardware and software necessary to run many games. Second, the museum also gathers media coverage of games, most prominently in the form of computer and gaming magazines. Third, the museum preserves archives of designer notes, business records, marketing materials, and other items that document how games are made, marketed, and played. Fourth, the museum has begun using tools such as the Kryoflux USB-based floppy controller to migrate data from formats that are at risk (such as 5 1/4" floppies) to more durable hosting devices. Finally, through a grant sponsored by the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the museum is engaged in an extensive project to capture video of game play of thousands of games in the museum's collection. This last tool is one that has great potential to capture information about games like Massively Multiplayer

Online games that rely on a large user base and external servers and thus are in greatest danger to be lost.

The Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games undertakes these efforts in conjunction with other institutions and in conversation with scholars of the history of games. Game scholarship and game conservation go hand in hand, and each informs the other. The questions game scholars ask guide the work of collecting and conservation that museums like The Strong undertake, and likewise the materials that organizations like The Strong collect inform and enable the work of game scholars. In order for the field of game history to develop further, scholarly communities and collecting communities must continue to work in close cooperation. If they do the field as a whole will grow and mature. The Strong looks forward to aiding that growth through its International Center for the History of Electronic Games.

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