

Industry Comments

Opinion pieces highlighting gaming industry issues and insights, legal developments, economic aspects, and other topics of concern to gaming researchers, executives, managers and policy makers.

In this issue:

1. **Bibliographic Software: An Overview of Selection Criteria for Gaming Researchers**
2. **Review of the 14th International Conference on Gambling & Risk Taking**

Bibliographic Software: An Overview of Selection Criteria For Gaming Researchers

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For gaming researchers and industry authors staying current with the latest version of a given style format (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago) is a daunting and nearly impossible task given the frequency with which they change to accommodate new research resources. Bibliographic software attempts to offer a solution to the problem; however, it is important that users fully understand the capabilities and limitations of the software in order to avoid frustration and wasted time.

What is bibliographic software? Each program varies greatly, but the more expensive or robust software packages enable the user to organize their research, share their citations (books, journals, interviews, websites, etc.) with colleagues and create bibliographies formatted for a specific style. Several of the commercial packages include plug-ins for word processing software that will allow users to automatically format in-text citations and bibliographies while the paper is being created. It is recommended that users not attempt to apply the software to manually created citations in a work-in-progress. Instead the selected software should be used from the start of the writing process.

A complete understanding of a researcher's needs in organizing their citations is essential in determining the software that should be used. The questions that individuals should ask are - What does the software need to do? Should it only create formatted bibliographies? Should it create bibliographies and store citations for use in future projects? Will the software restrict use to one computer or does it allow for accessing stored citations via the web and on other frequently used computers?

The following considerations can be applied to the free and the commercial types of software. Apart from the obvious cost difference between the two types of software, the commercial packages contain many more features than the free software, and the free software is often used as an enticement to lure the user to purchase the full package. For the free or commercial software, individuals usually need to store and create bibliographies.

Ease of use is often the primary consideration when selecting bibliographic software, but it should not be the only one. When evaluating the software, users should determine

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how quickly and easily citations can be exported to and imported from various sources. How compatible is the software with electronic databases and journals? Will the software allow the user to import citations from other sources such as the Internet, RSS feeds, etc.? Will the software allow users to easily and seamlessly change documents from one format to the next

Costs associated with the software should also be considered when choosing bibliographic software. Many institutions offer the software through licensing agreements, but if a user decides to leave the institution and would like to continue using the software, how much would it cost to purchase an individual user license? Will there be maintenance fees associated with the software? How much will upgrades cost for individuals or are they free?

While some bibliographic software is embedded in word processing software, it is important to determine if there will be compatibility issues related to the word processing software or the type of computer being used. Some software is also only compatible with certain web browsers. Institutions have security measures that will sometimes interfere with the use of the software, so troubleshooting becomes a part of successfully utilizing bibliographic software, and could become a deterrent from using the software. Users will often experience problems with pop-up blockers from their chosen internet browsers, added toolbars (e.g., Google, Yahoo, etc.) or their Internet service provider. Consulting help guides, software support, or institution administrators usually resolves these issues.

Accuracy of bibliographic software is a frequent complaint. It is important to understand that the software is only as good as the information that it contains, whether that be from a database, a website or a user. The software is a more convenient method of organizing and creating bibliographies, but once again, each user must have some knowledge of the style format that they are using. It is always important to check each bibliography for accuracy. Many times, software will transpose fields, not capture all of the citation data, and inaccurately capitalize or punctuate data fields. While the software has made vast improvements over manually creating formatted bibliographies, style manuals remain an important component of the process of creating accurate bibliographies. Frequently, bibliographic software will offer help or tips related to the chosen style format. It is strongly suggested that users remain current with the latest changes to frequently used style formats by consulting the publisher's website or by consulting their institution's library (if applicable).

The number of output styles (e.g., APA, Chicago, MLA, etc.) is another consideration for those using bibliographic software. Will the software contain current and past versions? The speed at which the style formats are updated is critical, especially when the latest version of a style format is published. Will the software contain the style format of the top ranked journals if different from the most commonly used formats? The ability to request the addition of new formats is another helpful feature that some companies provide.

The speed and accuracy of the help and support features of bibliographic software are often overlooked when considering the selection of the software. Clear and easy to access help guides should be available from the software vendor. Are the guides available in other languages? What types of online tutorials or web-based training are available from the vendor and are they free? If the software is supported by the user's institution are instruction workshops offered or is individual consultation available?

The loss of data is a common occurrence with computers, so ensuring that created databases of citations are backed up is a prudent measure. Several bibliographic software packages offer this capability to individual users in addition to the measures provided by the company. This is especially important if users will be moving to other institutions and wish to transfer their citations to different software.

Inadequate search features can be a great frustration when working with citations stored in bibliographic software. Thought should be given to the ease of retrieving stored information as well as the accuracy with which it is retrieved. Some software makes

it possible to search other databases within the software in order to include additional citations from other sources such as university library online catalogs.

Collaboration is the norm in many institutions, so the ability to share bibliographies is not just a nice feature, but sometimes a necessity. Many of the commercial packages offer this capability. Faculty often use the creation of subject specific bibliographies as a student assignment, so users should check their software's ability to create group accounts or other options to meet this need. Many of the packages offer the ability to add attachments or link to full-text content from their research institution. Caution should be exercised to ensure that copyright violations do not occur when sharing bibliographies. Users should check policies for their institutions and publishers of the resources that are being attached.

Attachments are allowed with some software packages. They will allow the user to attach everything from PDFs to spreadsheets for future reference. There will be storage, size and file type limitations, so users should consult the help features for additional information. Again, users are cautioned about copyright infringement with the use of this feature. It is recommended that users should consult their institution's and the publisher's policies.

Related to attachment storage space is a limitation on citation storage. The commercial packages tend to have high limitations, sometimes up to 10,000 citations and above, but there may be a difference in this allotment based on the version of the software that is being used. It is wise to check with the vendor or your institution's administrator to see if there are storage limitations or if additional space can be created.

Users should carefully consider these criteria before selecting any software or recommending the software to their students. Although many organizations provide or endorse specific products, users should still consider their needs before investing time storing and organizing resources in the provided bibliographic software. In some instances, users may choose to use software outside of the endorsed software because one or more of their criteria cannot be met by that software. Faculty should also consider which type of software they endorse for their students based on their needs as well. Recommending a complicated software to undergraduates who will only be required to write a minimal number of papers in the semester may not be the best course of action. Providing alternatives such as free, simple, web-based products to serve that purpose will often be less time-consuming for the student and faculty. More robust software is usually better for graduate students writing theses or dissertations, because they will likely use their research for future publications.

Using bibliographic software does not exempt each user from understanding the basics of their chosen style format, although bibliographic software does save a considerable amount of time in constructing a bibliography. Users are urged to carefully review completed bibliographies for accuracy and style format changes, as each software package will have different systems and timelines for updating style format changes. Given the perceived challenges with using bibliographic software, users may quite often find that the ability to store citations for future use, the ability to organize citations and now the portability of citations due to web-based software is worth the investment of time to learn and adopt one of these systems.

The following reference list contains examples of free and commercial software.

Free Resources

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Commercial Software

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