



Preserving play: selection, replication, circulation

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Recent years have witnessed many encouraging initiatives dedicated to the preservation of game history. In 2014, UC Santa Cruz and Stanford experts published “A Unified Approach to Preserving Cultural Software Objects and their Development Histories” (Kaltman *et al.*). In Oceania and all over Europe, more efforts are being channeled to unearth local game histories, and some of these stories have already found their way into a major historical overview (*Video Games Around the World*, 2015). Contribution from fan cultures, which is typically overviewed briefly in sweeping chronicles about the medium’s technological and industrial development, has become an object of fascination in itself (*Fans and Videogames: Histories, Fandom, Archives*, 2017). The *Internet archive* has brought many classic games to the masses thanks to in-browser emulation, and dedicated hobbyist communities strive to archive complete ROM sets for every possible platform. Exceptions to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act are sought and defended by a growing alliance of professional preservationists. Game related museums and cultural institutions have emerged in many countries in an effort to introduce the history of video games to a wider audience and highlight its cultural value.

In his 2012 contribution *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*, James Newman doesn’t hide his pessimism about the preservation of video games in playable form. While many preservation efforts proliferate around the globe, the material and legal challenges

that feed Newman's discussion are only getting more intricate. For the time being the community can rely on EverDrives and the Gotek floppy emulator, but video games in their material form are indeed "dying". Is it realistic to rely on the hobbyist community to build reliable low-level emulation, considering the complexity of such efforts for consoles released in the 1990s? The rise of retro-monetization has created an incentive for the industry to emulate its own legacy, but this interest from stakeholders means that more efforts are dedicated to shutting down abandonware sites and control the circulation of classic titles. Remarketing video games that are not even 20 years old in a perfectly legal manner becomes difficult in the current context, where rights for different components of a single game can be scattered between many entities, diffracted further by local distribution agreements. For instance, Night Dive studios announced in February 2015 that they had no choice but to abandon their project to bring *No One Lives Forever* on GOG or Steam; their lawyers were unable to untangle the legal situation. The *Entertainment Software Association* has actively lobbied against some of the exemptions to copyright laws that are sought for museums and other preservation institutions; maintaining these exemptions and defending new ones might require much labor in the upcoming years.

Beyond the preservation of the artefacts themselves, how can we preserve play? In "The Impossible Task of Reconstructing the rules to an Ancient Board Game", Natasha Frost highlights some of the difficulties faced by researchers who seek to recreate the experience of an old board game with no rulebook and half the pieces missing. Even with the complete material experience properly preserved in a box, the experience of play from historical moments that are far closer to us can remain evanescent, and the intricacies of gameplay forever lost in time. The contributions in this special issue explore the same underlying web of questions raised by contemporary attempts to preserve play. How can we reconstruct the interactive experience? How important is the materiality of the object in preserving play? What types of experiences and performances are integrated in this process? What are the current strategies used to represent play in cultural institutions? What is the role of private collectors and fans in preserving play both on and offline? Which gaming experiences do we seek to preserve, and why?

In "Playing Games With Cultural Heritage" Joanna Barwick, James Dearnley and Adrienne Muir identify selection as one of the most contentious aspects of game preservation. While many institutions have laid out selection criteria, notions such as "important", "landmark" and "pioneer" games often appear to be taken for granted (2011:385). The question of selection

naturally emerged as a central concern in most of the contributions featured in this special issue of Kinephanos. In an industry of constant supersession, potential sites for media archeologists proliferate at an alarming rate; Aycock shares his insight on the selection process of relevant terrains to uncover and document technical implementation skills. Hobbyists continue to make new game content for older machines (for instance the annual Speccy Jam invites veteran and younger game creators to explore the potential of the ZX Spectrum), actively fighting the culture of obsolescence, yet the preservation of these efforts is rarely seen as a priority. Deeming and Murphy's inspection of Dreamcast fan-made games highlights just how much play one might be missing out looking at history only through the lens of commercial lifespans. Newman stresses the importance of integrating exploits performed by expert players – the famous example of the Minus World in *Super Mario Bros.* – in his presentation of the Game Inspector at the National Videogame Arcade. Similarly, Scully-Blaker's overview of glitch hunting and speedrunning sheds light on the extent of "alternative" play practices, and the interest in preserving such appropriative play.

While justifications behind curatorial selections – the "why?" – can remain implicit in video game exhibitions, representational strategies – the "how" – become visible and sometimes tangible in the space of the museum. Our interviewees all acknowledge the necessity to keep some form of accessibility to games in their playable form. Mario Accordi Rickards and Miceala Romanini (VIGAMUS Foundation director / vice-director, respectively) see this as an opportunity for "stealth learning"; visitors acquire knowledge about important games and design elements by playing the classics. Yet even the most popular and widespread platforms are confronted to obsolescence and maintaining such exhibits become increasingly difficult. This creates an additional financial stress on institutions; Andreas Lange notes that the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin hires a team of three technicians to maintain their equipment. Moreover, such technical expertise will become harder to find in the near future. As Newman notes, interactivity doesn't entail accessibility to the game experience, especially in the context of a museum visit. Taking notice of the inevitable material obsolescence, his contribution highlights the potential of audiovisual representations of gameplay to provide a clearer, curated second hand access. For Scully-Blaker, speedrunning in itself can be seen as a curatorial gesture, seeking to expose hidden potentialities within the game object.

Many institutions have tried to involve the gaming community at large in the selection process to develop their exhibitions; The Strong Museum of Play's World Video Game Hall of Fame

relies on nominations and votes from the public, and the project even led to the release of *A History of Video Games in 64 Objects* (2018). The Finnish Museum of Games in Tampere sought to develop this community from the very inception of the project through a crowdsourcing campaign. Suominen, Sivula and Garda provide an incredible overview of the project's development, focussing on the joint efforts of fans, collectors and museum curators. This contribution, and hopefully the totality of this special issue, can be seen as a "how to" for any group seeking to build similar institutions. In spite of decaying materiality and other curatorial challenges, institutional mediation becomes essential in order for play culture to circulate and inspire new generations of fans, designers, tinkerers and scholars. We are grateful to all the contributors in this issue for their dedication and commitment to the preservation of play.

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