Mythmaking and codebreaking: The hunt for GTAV's Bigfoot and/as digital cultural memory

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers play as an archival practice and its impact on the future histories of videogames and digital culture. Drawing upon De Kosnik's notion of 'rogue archives' (2016), this paper demonstrates how certain play activities generate archival materials and how noncanonical works and/as practices shape our digital cultural memory.

Keywords

archives, digital cultural memory, repertoire, play cultures, media archaeology, videogame preservation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Originally released in September 2013 on PS3 and Xbox, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013) (GTAV hereafter) was later rereleased on PS4, Xbox One and Windows PC in an "enhanced" edition in 2014. In addition, *GTA Online*, the online component of GTAV which added online multiplayer modes of play to an already expansive single player experience, initially went "live" in October 2013 and continues to expand as new content is added through incremental patches and updates. Even though GTAV is now over five years old, it still attracts a large player base peaking over 100,000 active daily users registered on Steam alone (steamcharts.com n.d.). Unsurprisingly, then, the GTAV of 2019 plays and feels very much *unlike* the GTAV of 2013.

This is business as usual for big budget videogame developers such as Rockstar Games. For better and for worse, as Koster (2019) summarises, the dominance of 'games-as-a-service' (GaaS) business strategies continue to shape the design and delivery of many commercial videogames. For online games this is especially true as 'long-tail' (Anderson 2006) revenue models expect players to turn into *payers* in the long term. GTAV's continued presence is testament to Rockstar Games' success at retaining an active player base.

Whilst commercially imperative, GaaS business strategies provide additional challenge for those concerned with videogame preservation. As Lowood (2002) suggests, videogames are problematic as they can be seen as both objects and activities. As objects, videogames share much in common with other software-based art works and born-digital media whose inherent variability challenge traditional conservation strategies (e.g. Depocas et al 2003; Duranti et al 2012; Paul 2007; Swade 2002). As activities, what practices of documentation are best suited to capture the performative aspects of gameplay?

Broadly speaking, videogame preservation places the playable object—the videogame—at its heart. Approaches to preserving our experience(s) of play,

however, differ and significantly. In short, there are those concerned with providing long-term access to the *playable* videogame (e.g. Pinchbeck et al 2009; Guttenbrunner et al 2010) and those concerned with documenting the configurative and performative aspects of *playing* videogames (e.g. Newman 2011; 2012a; 2012b) and/or in combination (e.g. Lowood 2002; 2011; McDonough et al 2010; Stuckey et al 2013). Moreover, the permeability, plasticity, and extensile nature of videogames (Boluk and Lemieux 2017) further complicates matters. Modding culture (Nieborg 2005) and other transformative acts of play such as Machinima (Lowood 2006; 2008) radically transform videogames in often significant and unforeseeable ways (Newman 2008). Alongside the multitude of add-ons, hacks, mods, modes, and save-states catalogued on community-ran websites such as gta5-mods.com, for example, GTAV has also been appropriated in numerous other ways: as art installation (Watanabe 2015); documented as social commentary (Butler 2005); even recast as live-action roleplay ("LSPD First Response" n.d.) to name but a few. How then does, or even should, videogame preservation begin to also account for all these non-exhaustive transformative acts and/as transformative works?

Videogames are full of secrets. Secrets embedded within the architecture of their design and by virtue of being computer simulations (Newman 2008). It is through play that videogames reveal their secrets to us. GTAV quite consciously builds its world and mission structures through reference to popular culture including conspiracy theories, mythical beasts, and alien encounters.

In part, this paper focuses on the unfolding of one such mystery. Born of another earlier release, spun across multiple Rockstar Games' titles, a mystery that emanates first from player speculation to later resolve through a series of interventions made by the developers themselves. Cryptic clues left by the programmers—quite literally encoded within the game code itself—enabled a group of dedicated players calling themselves 'the Codewalkers' (Hernandez 2016) to eventually solve the mystery of Bigfoot.

This paper considers the archival value of such 'player stories' (Stuckey 2014). Not only their record but also their means of production. Figurations of player activity that stand testament to playing as a form of knowledge production. A practice that reveals multiple, what Bogost and Montfort call, 'layers' (platformstudies.com n.d.) of new media artefacts. A form of (media) archeological investigation (see Parikka 2012) that interrogates the very 'fabric of the game-to-be-played-with' (Newman 2012b, 136). What emerges is a thick description of not just what but *how* it means to play videogames. As content, form, and practice.

To substantiate this claim, I draw upon De Kosnik's (2016) formulation of digital cultural memory. Taking influence from Taylor's (2003) insistence on the body in the transmission of cultural memory, De Kosnik conceives of a double-helix composed of both works (archive) and the activities involved in their making (repertoire). De Kosnik's particular concerns emanate from studies in fan fiction production. Parallels here can be drawn between *fan-ficcing* and the 'configurative practices' (Moulthrop 2004; Dovey and Kennedy 2006) of playing videogames. In conclusion, De Kosnik's concept of 'rogue archives' (2016), alongside Eichborn's concept of 'archival genres' (2008), are used to highlight the need to reevaluate the cultural value of non/ anticanonical works and/as practices in the formation, dissemination, and future histories of digital culture.

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