What Do Videogames Want? (Introduction)

Preserving, Playing and not Playing Digital Games and Gameplay

James Newman (Bath)

Introduction: Videogames are disappearing

At a time when there are more gaming platforms and titles available than ever before, it might seem strange to claim that videogames are disappearing. And yet, despite their apparent abundance, the processes of material and digital deterioration render hardware and software unusable as hard drives fail, discs become unreadable, activation servers are re-allocated and newly released systems offer limited compatibility with existing libraries of games and peripherals. Adding to this, journalistic, retail and marketing practices fuel a marketplace of perpetual innovation that rationalises and justifies the rapidity of supersession and obsolescence.

As such, videogames are, without doubt, disappearing and the continued – and accelerating – loss of this material denies future generations access to their cultural heritage and robs the next generation of developers historical reference material to draw on. As Henry Lowood [2009] pointed out more than a decade ago, we need to take action 'before it's too late'.

Building on ideas initially explored in *Best Before* [Newman 2012] and developed through the *Game Over* [Newman and Simons 2018] and *Time Extend!* [Newman and Simons 2020] White Papers, this paper outlines a range of different approaches to preserving, interpreting and exhibiting videogames. The paper offers an overview and critique of existing approaches and revisits some of the methodological and conceptual presuppositions that underpin game preservation and even the academic discipline of game studies as a whole. Returning to first principles, the paper asks 'What Do Videogames Want?'. This deceptively simple question appears similarly straightforward to answer. Surely, videogames want to be played? The idea that videogames have to be played to be understood seems almost self-evident. Indeed, as Consalvo *et al* [2013] have noted, their playability is a key, perhaps even defining, feature of videogames, as such, play has long been considered a crucial technique in the game studies researcher's methodological toolkit [Aarseth 2003]. In fact, as this paper demonstrates, we might go even further and say that videogames *need* to be played and that, without the constitutive acts of play and performance, there is no game.

Playing and not playing

It is hardly surprising, then, that much videogame preservation theory and practice continues to centre on maintaining longterm playability. But, if play is so contingent and configurative, is there not a case for suggesting that it cannot solely be the outcome of preservation. Of course, there is potentially much to learn from playing in the future. If their look, sound and feel can be successfully recreated through emulation or some other technical means, researchers, scholars, developers and the like can explore these virtual worlds, experience the *feel* of gameplay and the responsiveness (or otherwise) of controls and feedback loops, for instance. But, this paper argues, while this is important, there are unavoidable limits to the insights that can be revealed through these means.

Most obviously, videogames are difficult and play is not a trivial undertaking. Quite apart from the a priori knowledge of conventions, strategies and tactics, the very act of performance requires an adept player. If we consider that the ability to unlock sequences, characters and narratives is contingent on this knowledge and prowess in performance, we quickly encounter the limits of one's own play as the means of accessing games.

Moreover, there is no singular playing of a videogame. As flexible, mutable collections of resources to be *played with*, videogames support a myriad different possible playings which might see them almost unrecognisably reconfigured as techniques, quirks, bugs, errors and glitches are incorporated into the ludic lexicon. Quite simply, play is broad, complex and diverse and it is incumbent on us to account for the variety of possible playings and players. As such, who is playing and how they play become questions of paramount importance not only because of the impact on the ability to define or reveal the extent of the game as we saw above, but also because relying on our own play will necessarily render a host of insights and (re)constructions of games unavailable and unknown to us.

And, of course, we might also reasonably ask what we might reveal by visiting the worlds of (massively) multiplayer, online, collaborative games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017) *et al* either now or in the future. So much of what made these games significant and notable are the ephemeral performances and playful interactions that took place inside their worlds in the past. There are no records or traces contained within the worlds and no way in which playing today or tomorrow can reveal their complex histories.

Archiving experience

And so we arrive at a situation in which it is necessary to rethink our aims and shift the objective of game preservation away from a focus on ensuring the long-term playability to one that also encompasses the collection, archiving and interpretation of practices of play. In short, play is too important, too configurative, too constitutive and too diverse to be only the outcome of videogame preservation. It must, therefore, form part of the object of preservation. In order to illustrate some possible approaches, this paper highlights two projects on which I have worked with the National Videogame Arcade and National Videogame Museum in the UK.

The first example, *The Game Inspector*, presents a navigable space that allows users to encounter a rich array of video-captured footage of gameplay highlighting different ways of playing, the operation of the game's systems and mechanics, and even its glitchy malfunctioning. By removing play as the means of access and focusing on traversing an information space, *The Game Inspector* most obviously makes available a diversity of insights and '(re)constructions' of the game. However, beyond this, working on *The Game Inspector* project demonstrated the unexpected value of video captured gameplay. While removing the dynamism of play might seem immeasurably deleterious to this 'interactive' medium, the potentials that are opened up by adopting the language and grammar of video editing are considerable. Being able to pause, zoom in and out, fast forward and rewind, offers interpretative opportunities for forensic analysis and contextualisation that are simply impossible during the freneticism and focus of play.

The second case study takes a rather different approach to an altogether different game. The *Animal Crossing Diaries* is a project led by the National Videogame Museum which invited players of Animal Crossing New Horizons (Nintendo 2020) to share their experiences of playing the game during the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to an open call, players documented not only their approaches to playing and improvising with the game, but also revealed the deeply personal meanings that the game held for them. The collection of videos, images and written diary entries built a complex picture of a space used to manage mental health, to connect remote friends and family, and provide order, structure and purpose at a time when the ordinary and everyday had become difficult or even impossible. Above all, the *Animal Crossing Diaries* project highlights the centrality of players and the creative improvisations that transform games into unexpected places and experiences.

Both of these examples lead us to recognising not only the diversity of possible playings for which preservation must account, but also that our own play places restrictions on access to the textuality and potential of the game and, accordingly, to the insights we are able to reveal. As such, it remains the case that videogames have to be played to be understood, but we can go further in suggesting that, in order to build up a comprehensive picture of the textuality and meanings of these games, we need to recognise that they are always *played with* and *in play*. Accordingly, by whom they are played, in which contexts and with what intentions are questions of paramount importance.

It follows that, at least part of the project of videogame preservation might be best understood not in terms of servicing or recreating hardware and software in order to facilitate long term playability, but rather as a documentation project dedicated to revealing, collecting and archiving experiences.

References

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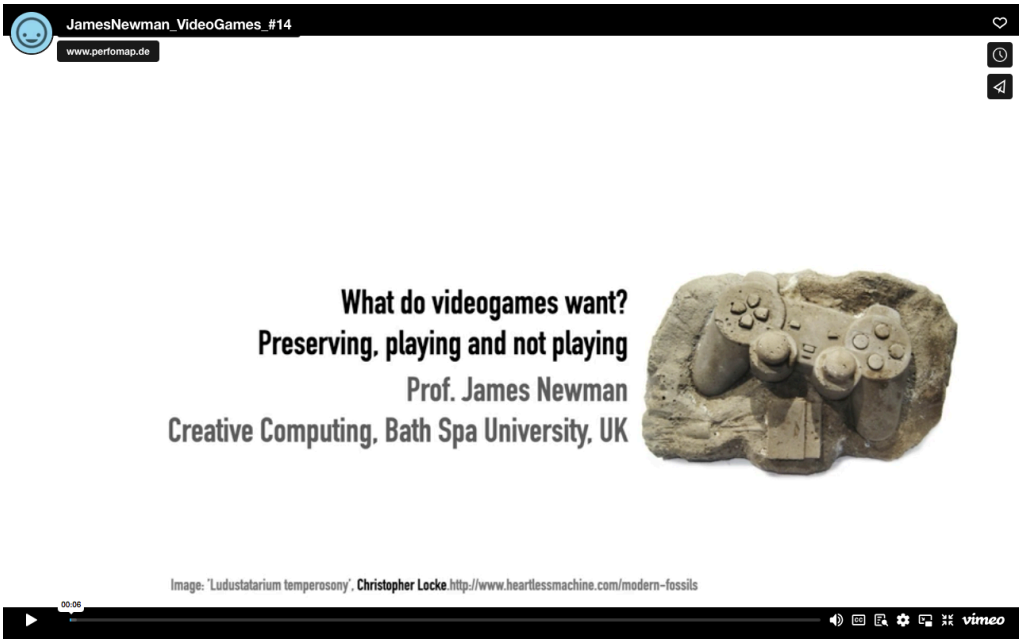
What Do Videogames Want? (lecture)



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