

Save Points: Video Games and the Preservation of Play

Christopher Goetz, University of Iowa

As a teenager in the late 1990s, I used a Sony Handycam to capture videogame play sessions with friends so that the game's on-screen events along with the sound of off-screen vocalizations, button mashes, and physical altercations, were recorded together as an ensemble. The tapes, and the games we recorded—*Mario Kart 64*, *Super Smash Bros.*, *GoldenEye 007*, and *Perfect Dark*—became a central part of my closest friendships growing up. My friends and I watched these tapes repeatedly, memorizing and referencing them in subsequent recordings, making them into a highly personal, living archive of precious memories. Though I have lost these recordings to a harddrive crash in the early 2000s, what these tapes documented (with the memory of the tapes themselves) is still key to my experience of playing games today.

This roundtable response frames questions of videogame preservation in terms of play's personal and ephemeral dimensions as a rejoinder to our moment of widely disseminated and quickly replaced instances of play (via Twitch.tv livestreaming or YouTube). I am eager to explore the ways in which recording and then revisiting key moments in gameplay has figured, historically, into the everyday experience of videogames before online streaming became commonplace. This interest stems from a wider project involving the collection of personal play documents. It begins with the provocation that the irreducible uniqueness of each moment of play is perhaps exchanged for something else in a culture of streaming, where "content" must be regularly updated in order to maintain viewer/subscriber interest.

More broadly speaking, my personal recordings are a pointed reminder for me of what is left out when the game is thought about strictly in terms of its software or when reduced to a "text" (however conceived). Recent work on expanding the conventional boundaries of the videogame text views the "metagame" as the thing we actually create when we play, arguing that there is no game without the metagame. This work has identified important, overlooked dimensions of gaming and has emphasized the need within videogame historiography for a "history of the metagame" as it has developed and changed over time (a change that is often irrespective of changes in software).

Preserving personal archives or personal play objects both includes but also exceeds this notion of a history of the metagame, since an individual's encounter with a game need not congeal in consistent ways with meanings and practices established by wider player communities, nor does a meaningful, personal memory of a game need have anything to do with strategies employed to win (as a history of a metagame often implies). In truth, I have no idea how to talk about or convey to others what is on these personal tapes—I would be embarrassed if anybody outside my group of friends saw them. For me, the tapes preserve something of the intense joy of sharing these

interactions with my friends. The games opened up potential intimacies (intense, sustained, and affectively charged interactions) not possible in any other context. The tapes somehow captured or made concrete the value of these interactions. The steady erosion of memory over time, along with the eclipsing of these once hugely important interpersonal relationships, is largely what makes the tapes so precious.

The tapes help emphasize for me how playing videogames was a special way for my (heterosexual, cis-gendered male friends) to relate and express a kind of love for one another, as well as a way to direct our inexhaustible anticipation for the future: for what games we might play, for where we might go, and what we might become. I postulate that preserving our interaction with games opened up a way into the future through the safe terrain of a recorded (captured, reliable, dependably available) past.

This temporal relationship is unique to games because as events with multiple simultaneous actors engaging in fast-paced interactions, their complexity by definition exceeds what most individuals can process during their initial unfolding. Returning to these tapes repeatedly means steadily encountering and incorporating a complex unfolding, as if uncovering hidden gems, small details both in the game and in our verbal exchanges while playing that, taken as a totality, remain stubbornly beyond the threshold of perception during any live event. This totality includes intensely charged contingent occurrences, accidental rhythms or quips that, in repetition, become like a mantra and acquire a sort of mythic value. Looking back, in this sense, seems to open new possibilities for discovery and meaning (a kind of future potential locked in the past). And in this way, it might be said that our interest in the preservation of irreducible moments in play was key to the social role games played in our adolescence, offering a way for a small group of friends on wildly different life trajectories to imagine a shared future.