

Save Points: Video Games and the Preservation of Play

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The question of preservation in relation to games has proven to be a vexing one. We are a relatively young medium and as such have seen the decay and potential disappearance of other mediums, particularly as hardware deteriorates or is rendered obsolete. Retro game consoles and CRT televisions are often coveted and carefully stored and maintained to stave off their eventual demise. Whether we speak of cartridges or discs, physical copies of games are similarly troublesome to ‘keep going’ and the more recent emergence of digital downloads poses its own questions about authenticity and ownership. Even the preservation of game software through emulation has been problematized. Is it the same ‘experience’ to play Super Mario Bros. on the NES as it is on the Virtual Console with a Pro Controller? What about on a computer with a legally-dubious ROM and a mouse and keyboard?

In response to these issues, it has been suggested that we preserve gameplay footage as a more lasting and evocative means to represent what it means to play and have played with and within videogames. And this is something I want to talk about, because I think it’s an important idea to unpack. How do we decide what to save? Do we archive everything? Is all gameplay footage equally worthy of preservation, or is there some set of characteristics that makes some play worth saving? In some ways these questions are red herrings since sites like *Twitch* and *YouTube* are effectively exercises in this very thought experiment. And I want to talk about a couple of examples of how play is coded and conserved on these sites that reveal that there is much more at stake here than the gradual decay of technologies.

A lot of my research has been on the speedrunning community. For those that don’t know, speedrunning is the practice of completing a game as quickly as possible without cheating. This sort of play generally consists of both extreme efficiency of movement and execution as well as a bevy of game-breaking glitches. The speedrunning community would not be what it was today without *YouTube* or *Twitch*. From both personal observation and lengthy interviews, I have seen the community grow and flourish as new platforms for content creation become available. Gameplay that runs directly counter to the developer intent that goes into crafting virtual worlds and virtual narratives has gone from a niche practice to a well-known feature of game culture that has impacted *how some games are designed*. I can talk about speedrunning all day, but for now, I think it will suffice to say that I am grateful for the Internet’s uncanny ability to preserve virtually everything (for at least some span of time) in this instance as it has allowed for the creation of what one might call a museum of accidents – a curated set of videos and livestreams that thwart the positivist ideas of games as immutable and technology as progress.

At the same time, however, I am very aware of the problems that these platforms pose for play and players. My preferred example here is that of the competitive *Super Smash Bros.* scene, but there are many others. Briefly, in response to a series of design choices that made *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* less competitive than its predecessor, *Melee*, several mods were developed by the community to try and make the game more interesting for high-level players. The most successful of these mods was *Project M*, which, while illegal, was seemingly ignored by Nintendo. Given the company's track record with copyright strikes this was surprising. Time passed and the competitive scenes around *Melee* and *Project M* grew (arguably because of Twitch) to a point that they clearly became a 'demographic' worth acknowledging for Nintendo. The fourth instalment in the series was promoted by a large tournament with prominent players from *Melee* and *Brawl/Project M's* respective scenes and the game's design took a clear swing back towards competition. Nintendo even began sponsoring community activities. At the same time, however, *Project M* tournaments quietly disappeared from all major events. By commodifying one type of player creativity (high-level play), Nintendo was able to quietly censor another (modding). Twitch, here, acted as a platform of enclosure that allowed other parties to effectively 'own' a community's play. Player professionalization is still a precarious process.

These are case studies that interest me, and I look forward to expanding upon them in the roundtable. Before closing, however, I'll just add that I think it is paramount for us to remember some key questions throughout the discussion to come – what are we talking about when we talk about preservation? Whose past is being preserved? Whose histories are erased by the hegemonic discourses that power normative notions of nostalgia? And how can we give those people voices too?