

The Stories that (Digital) Artifacts Tell: Video Game Historiography and the Idea of the Edition

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20-minute paper proposal

Any narrative-oriented video game will likely tell (at least) two stories: the fictional narrative the game sets out to tell, and the historical record of the game's production as an artifact of human labour.¹ The first kind of story has tended to be the concern of scholars who take interpretive approaches to game studies, while the second, historical story has tended to be the concern of video game historians and preservationists who work with forensic evidence, including source code. My goal in this paper is to explore how those two kinds of narratives—interpretive and forensic—interact and illuminate each other, and together shape the historiographies of video games in the present.

To answer this question, my paper will consider examples of two connected phenomena: 1) the prevalence and meaning of the term *edition* in titles of recent re-releases of games (e.g. *Mafia: Definitive Edition*, 2020), and the ways these re-released games construct their own historical narratives through paratexts and in-game developer commentary; and 2) the emergent practices of fan communities' forensic investigation, documentation, and even recovery of games with complex histories (e.g. Unseen64.net; ValveArchive.com; NOLFrevival.tk).

By 2024, it has never been more apparent that video games *are* historical materials. But what does it mean to call a game an *edition*, using a term that comes from book publishing and bibliography? The ubiquity of re-released games and "Game of the Year" editions on Steam and other retail platforms serves as a reminder that while games may differ from books in many respects, they are alike in being published texts (in the broadest sense of the term) which may exist in variant versions. As with books, video games' publication histories may be complex and tangled, even resulting in lost or "out-of-print" games. (A touchstone example in game history is the feminist spy-parody *The Operative: No One Lives Forever*, published in 2000 but presently unavailable except in a fan-made recreation; see NOLFrevival.tk.)

One of the most remarkable properties of video games and other born-digital artifacts is their capacity to record evidence of their own production—and to carry that evidence within the artifacts themselves, as they pass through time. In this respect, born-digital artifacts are similar to early manuscript and print books, which may bear traces of the scribes, compositors, pressmen, and bookbinders who took part in their making.² Videogame bibliography, an emerging subfield which takes its name from the discipline that developed descriptive and analytical methods for understanding books as material artifacts, and its work aligns well with projects that originate in fandom.

¹ On video games as artifacts, see Olli Sotamaa, "Artifact," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2023), 3–9.

² D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Fan communities have been documenting the histories of games through forensic investigation that mirrors textual scholarship's concern with the intensive study of books as artifacts and the role they play in the transmission of texts. For example, the website The Cutting Room Floor (tcrf.net) documents the phenomenon of *unused assets* in videogames: traces of dialogue, images, character/creature models, objects, architectural structures, texture maps, and even whole levels that do not appear in the playable game but may be recoverable in the game's source code. For historians and fans alike, unused assets can serve as evidence of the development process, of the constraints of the videogame industry's labour models, and of creative decisions that alter the meaning of the game as a cultural text. The middle section of my presentation will consider examples where recovered evidence of unused assets is important for forensic and interpretive approaches alike (drawing mainly on *Bioshock Infinite*, 2013).

The final part of my presentation will explore the potential for disciplinary conversation between video game studies and other fields that deal with cultural works in variant versions and editions. For example, principles and terms from bibliographical studies have already been imported into video game studies through the work of Nathan Altice and Chris Young, and in my own recent work on video game paratexts.³ Overall, my paper will argue that video game historiography would benefit from adapting theories and methods from the philological disciplines, especially bibliography, textual scholarship, and editorial theory—all of which are fields which, at their best, achieve a synthesis between the interpretive and preservational imperatives in working with historical materials.⁴

Author statement

Alan Galey is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, cross-appointed to the Department of English, and former director of the collaborative program in Book History and Print Culture. His research and teaching are located at the intersection of media studies, the history of books and reading, and digital textual scholarship. His current research focuses on methods for the bibliographical study of digital texts and artifacts, from ebooks to video games to digital recordings of musical performances. For a list of his publications and details about his current research, see his blog at <http://www.veilofcode.ca/>.

³ Nathan Altice, *I Am Error: the Nintendo Family Computer / Entertainment System Platform* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 333-43; Chris J. Young, "The Bibliographical Variants Between *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Remastered*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 110, no. 3 (2016): 459-84; Alan Galey, ed., *Video Games and Paratextuality*, spec. issues of *Games and Culture* 18, no. 6 (2023): <https://journals.sagepub.com/page/gac/special-issues/video-games-paratextuality>; Alan Galey and Ellen Forget, "Video Games with Footnotes: Understanding In-Game Developer Commentary," in *(Not) In the Game: History, Paratexts, and Games*, ed. Ed Vollans and Regina Seiwald (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 139-159.

⁴ On video games and philology, see Sebastian Zavala, "Gaming Philology: Text Criticism and Video Game Researches [sic]," in *Video Games You Will Never Play* (The Unseen64 Collective, 2016), 23-24.

Celeste 64: Open-Source Demaking as Self-Adaptative Design Practice

In early 2024, in celebration of the sixth anniversary of the release of their award-winning precision platformer *Celeste*, Canadian indie studio Maddy Makes Games released *Celeste 64: Fragments of the Mountain*. Made in just under two weeks and released for free via the developers' itch.io page, *Celeste 64* acts both as a pseudo-sequel to the main game and a continuation of the developer's previous efforts to "demake" *Celeste*. To contextualize this latter claim, in the final build of *Celeste*, Maddy Makes Games opted to include their original prototype for the game that they had created using PICO-8, a grassroots game engine that emulates the graphics of the 8-bit consoles of the 1980s. Additionally, on the third anniversary of *Celeste*, they released *Celeste Classic 2* (Maddy Makes Games, 2021), another freely available PICO-8 demake-sequel to the main game. In contrast to the simplified pixel aesthetics inherent to PICO-8, *Celeste 64* is a fully 3D game that, unsurprisingly given its title, works to replicate the low-poly look of Nintendo 64-era platformer games. As they had done with their previous two demakes, Maddy Makes Games not only released the game for free but also made the source code publicly available to download via GitHub so that fans could adapt it to make their own mods and/or entirely new games. Taking all of this into account, this paper asks the following research questions: What can be learned from examining a commercial game developer who produces non-commercial open-source demakes of their own games? What is significant about the process of a creator adapting their own work to the aesthetics and technical limitations of another time period? And finally, what are the connections that can be explored between prototyping, adaptation, and modding/modification in the context of contemporary game development?

To answer these questions, this paper will draw on a combination of Pippin Barr's (2020, 2023) work on film-to-game adaptations and how adaptation can be used as a productive design methodology; Melanie Swalwell's (2021) analysis of homebrew gaming and demakes and how both practices can be utilized to shine new light on the histories of independent game development; and finally, Larson's (2021) and Brown's (2023) respective scholarship on remakes and videogame temporality. Building on this collection of research, I argue that *Celeste 64* is more than a simple nostalgic experiment; it is a radical self-adaptive design practice that interrogates the boundaries of commercial and non-commercial game production. By demaking their own work and embracing outdated game aesthetics, Maddy Makes Games situates itself within a broader lineage of self-reflexive and counter-archival creative practices (Holzberg, 2024) that simultaneously challenge, critique, and/or expand upon their own histories. This approach not only repositions demaking as a form of temporal play but also challenges dominant models of videogame development by emphasizing openness, modularity, and communal authorship as central to the evolving identities of independent and informal game creation (Keogh, 2023).

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Author Bio

Andrew Bailey (he/him) is a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow with the Technoculture, Art and Games Research Lab at Concordia University and recently completed a Mitacs Accelerate Postdoctoral Fellowship with Archive/Counter-Archive at York University. Andrew teaches a variety of game studies, media art history, and film studies courses at OCAD, York, and McMaster University. He is currently working on a monograph based on his postdoctoral research on archiving Canadian independent game development and has upcoming chapters focused on videogame history and art in edited collections from Routledge, Edinburgh University Press, and Amherst College Press.

TITLE: Compilations of the Imagination: The Mock Compilation Form and Imagined Development Histories in *UFO 50* and *Sonic Dreams Collection*

Blending theories of postmodern aesthetics with a game studies methodology that focuses on material histories, this paper will explore how the emerging “mock compilation” video game form invokes imagined histories of game development and culture to question how games are made and remembered.

While some game compilations are mere value propositions (i.e., multiple games repackaged together for reduced price or convenience), others include paratexts, such as archival marketing materials, developer interviews, and explanatory prose, with aims at constructing and disseminating a history of games.

Compilations such as the latter are ripe for analysis themselves, but equally intriguing is the emerging “mock compilation” form, which adopts the compilation form to present collections of wholly new games as groups of curated historical artifacts. My paper will examine two games that use the mock compilation form to achieve distinct artistic effects: *UFO 50* (2024) and *Sonic Dreams Collection* (2015).

I will situate the mock compilation form using foundational discussion on postmodern pastiche from literary critics Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. Jameson suggests that a preoccupation with “nostalgia films” that revel in recreating aesthetics of the past via pastiche, such as *Chinatown* and *Star Wars*, is “an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (10). Conversely, Hutcheon sees pastiche as “a perfect postmodernist form” that “forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality” (17). Applying Jameson and Hutcheon, I will show how both titles, although they gleefully reproduce retro game aesthetics, succeed in using pastiche to question how we think about histories of game development and reception.

I will also examine these two mock compilations using an adaptation of the “archival” method as laid out by Judd Ethan Rugill and Ken S. McAllister. The archival method understands games as artifacts, necessarily networked with other objects and contexts in their capacity for meaning making, “always the incalculable sum of the many cultures, aesthetics, and industry practices that drive their development

process and embodiment in play” (327). I will apply the archival method not to analyze the real-world development and circulation of *UFO 50* and *Sonic Dreams Collection* but rather to foreground how the elements of fictional paratext in a mock compilation work together to present coherent imagined development and reception histories of the games within.

My analysis of *UFO 50* focuses on how it reconstitutes an awareness of the history and materiality of game development. I will support my reading using Jamie Woodcock’s look at the professionalization of game labour, in which he observes the industry adopt over time “a more regimented and managed labour process in which workers have lost the creative freedom which they might have had previously” (80).

Short descriptive blurbs accompanying each of the titles in *UFO 50* depict a small development studio, UFO Soft, who are very creatively close to their work and one another. However, there is also a hidden game in the compilation, included in protest by an employee critiquing the decline in management and culture at UFO Soft. This hidden game, titled “Miasma Tower,” questions how the mock compilation form is implicated in whitewashing histories of labour for consumers.

With *Sonic Dreams Collection*, I look at how fictional paratext helps foster a type of horror Jessica Balanzategui calls the digital gothic, which deploys “a consideration of processes of nostalgia, troubled memory and the uncanny to interrogate the dialectic tensions between childhood and adulthood, and between current and obsolete media technologies” (192). Presented as a collection of previously unseen 1990s prototypes from an unknown Sega-affiliated studio, *Sonic Dreams Collection* uses fictional paratext to give verisimilitude to disturbing and grotesque games featuring Sega’s child-friendly mascot, Sonic the Hedgehog. Here, the mock compilation form and digital gothic lead us to question a commonly shared and understood version of game development history.

Both the labour of video games and the preservation of game history face an uphill battle against capital. The mock compilation form is crucial to study for these discourses, as it provides valuable opportunities to reflect on the contexts under which games are produced and how games are used to tell stories about their own production.

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AUTHOR'S STATEMENT:

Liv Cadwallader is currently a PhD student at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She previously presented at ICGaN 2023 and CGSA 2023 on narrative in digital adaptations of *Magic: The Gathering* and the *Pokémon Trading Card Game*. Last year, she presented at CGSA 2024 on skateboarding and its challenge to urban architecture in the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series. Her MA research explored tensions between surrealism and systems of global capitalism in the role-playing game *EarthBound*. Her current research interests include game compilations, representations of urban environments in games, and the films of David Cronenberg.

Adapting to a Generational Leap: Mixed-Methods Analysis of *Dragon Quest's* Evolution from NES to SNES

This presentation is part of a project that applies data regarding hardware limitations and software asset development and reuse towards a mixed-methods analysis of Chunsoft's *Dragon Quest* games on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES). In particular, the presentation will cross-analyze its case studies, *Dragon Quest III (DQ3)* and *Dragon Quest IV (DQ4)* on the NES (originally localized as *Dragon Warrior*) with *Dragon Quest V (DQ5)* on the SNES. While *DQ3* solidified the game design foundation the series is still known for, *DQ4* and *DQ5* each show significant innovations in narrative design—with the former working within similar hardware constraints to *DQ3* and the latter taking advantage of much higher memory and processing power. The analysis will highlight new elements and structural changes with each game to consider how the developers took advantage of advanced technology to offer new gameplay and narrative experiences within an otherwise fixed game design. The larger intent of the project is to show how collaborative, interdisciplinary research methods can reveal greater insights into the cultural history and material processes that inform the creation and significance of a videogame or series as textual objects.

Quantitatively, the project will have three steps: automated data mining, manual data curation, and quantitative data analysis (Han). We will collect data from *Dragon Quest III*, *IV*, and *V*, on the games' assets and mechanics, like enemy monsters, playable characters, spells/skills, and items/equipment. The goal is to observe if and how more advanced hardware allows the developers to iterate and expand the game design. Qualitatively, we will apply this data towards analyzing the games with consideration of their development context, formal differences, and paratexts (Fernandez-Vara). The research will draw on crowd-sourced websites for information on the evolving development team (MobyGames), hardware specifications (NesCartDb, SNES Games Database), and developer interviews (Shmuplations). We synthesize this information to explore the minor leaps between cartridge sizes from *DQ3-DQ4* and how the generational leap to *DQ5* on the SNES allowed Chunsoft to refine the technical and aesthetic presentation of each new game, resulting in new presentational possibilities and a more dynamic narrative design.

We will be analyzing the narrative design of our case studies, rather than just their game design or story, and contextualize it through material factors. Berger describes narrative design as the creation of a narrative system, which is based on triggering criteria for story mechanism tied to the game design and thus requires a synthesis of design, storytelling, and software engineering skillsets (24-25). Other important aspects of narrative design to add substance to this system include art, animation, and audio. In our case studies, these elements were handled by Toriyama, Chunsoft's programmers, and Sugiyama, respectively—and their creative contributions expand as hardware advances. As opposed to the story writer of a novel or screenplay, a narrative designer's creativity is limited by material factors that determine what ideas can actually be implemented (Berger 25). The study will therefore offer a clearer lens to

the sorts of restraints lead designer/writer Yuji Horii and his team had to work around while developing the games with a mutually supportive game system and narrative system. Horii compares his working relationship with the games' director and programming supervisor Koichi Nakamura to "that between a manga artist and story writer. The writer says 'here's the scene!' and the artist uses his intuition to depict it visually" (qtd. in Shmuplations). Our analysis unveils the creative dynamics between this interpersonal, interdisciplinary authoring process.

The interdisciplinary work behind this project builds on the imperative put forth by Aycock and Finn for computer science and humanities researchers to collaborate and complement each other's skillsets. They suggest that "it is only through engaging [technical] limitations that play is possible" because the "aesthetics of games lies somewhere between the material and immaterial worlds of hardware, software, and creative composition." Aycock and Finn's fundamental point is that the way game studies scholars often frame the 'text' of the game is an incomplete one because it privileges "the observable game itself" over code and hardware. Hardware limitations affect the design of software, and an analysis of the latter must account for the possibilities of the former through related platform studies (Arsenault). We take up this approach to better understand the perspective of game developers and the decisions they make, while synthesizing it with the player's experience of the observable game itself for a holistic and thorough analysis of our case studies.

With this theoretical grounding and interdisciplinary methodology, we explore how *Dragon Quest III, IV, and V* demonstrate Horii and Chunsoft's growing capabilities to enhance the narrative design of their games, pivoting from a pure, hardcore RPG experience in *DQ3* to one that invests in conceptual narrative framing and structural variation in its sequels. The new technical potential of the generational leap was not used to thoroughly reinvent *Dragon Quest's* traditionalist design, but to infuse it with more personality.

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