

Archival Adventuring

Melissa Kagen

Bangor University
JP Hall, College Road
Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2DG, U.K.
+44 7504 632913
m.kagen@bangor.ac.uk

Keywords

Archive, Walking Simulator, Performance, Space, Queer

INTRODUCTION

In Meow Wolf's *House of Eternal Return* (2016–present), the site-specific art installation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, visitors explore the house and ephemera of the fictional Selig family. They cross back and forth from the family's normal Victorian home to the wildly unearthly environments created by the Seligs' chaotic experiments with time, space, and death. The piece's ludonarrative mechanic is Archival Adventuring, a mechanic which can also be found at the forefront of several recent independent video games. In Archival Adventures, players comb through inert objects, papers, bookshelves, picture albums, computer programs, and other documents to piece a story together. Although many games rely on objects hidden throughout a world to deliver information to the player, certain games focus *primarily* on this mechanic: *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015), *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017), and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) all rely on the player's exploration of a static environment.

The larger version of this project compares the effects of Archival Adventuring in a physical environment like *House of Eternal Return* (*HoER*) and a virtual one like *What Remains of Edith Finch* (*WRoEF*). In both, the inert space the player explores is 'charged' by the awareness that, because anything can be meaningful, everything is. In a physical space, however, this effect is enhanced by the presence of so many objects not specifically created for the work; some of the books in *HoER* are books printed for other purposes, but some of them do contain pivotal clues and narratives. The mechanic thus encourages the player towards thoroughness and boredom, as they play with things to no purpose.

Thus this mechanic is a kind of queer gaming, as it finds ways to charge (or queer) quotidian objects and spaces through the experiences of boredom, uncertainty, slowness, and intermittent purposelessness. Queer Game Studies interrogates and subverts the heteronormative preoccupations of traditional gaming (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). The necessary boredom in an Archival Adventure encourages a slow exploration of charged objects and is starkly at odds with prevailing masculine ludonarrativity, which privileges competition, violence, achievement, and goal-oriented activity.

If we put this concept in conversation with one of the foundational ideas of Performance Studies—the importance of the archive—the link with queer gaming grows clearer. Near the inception of Performance Studies, Peggy Phelan wrote, "Performance's only life is in

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

© 2018 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. Performance...becomes itself through disappearance" (1993). Performance is that which refuses to remain; so, by extension, any component of a performance that can be kept in an archive constitutes something leftover.

In "Performance Remains," Rebecca Schneider points out the phallogocentric roots of our deference to a housed, written archive, noting that the Greek root of the word archive (archon) refers to the patriarch's *house*. "The archive is built on 'house arrest'—the solidification of value in ontology as retroactively secured in document, object, record" (104). If performance "becomes itself through disappearance," if it lives at the vanishing point, then the archive becomes a nice, solid repository of objects that we can hang onto.

Part of what is so important here is the way this maps onto gender. Schneider suggests that the relationship between a traditional, solid, lasting archive and an ephemeral, slippery, vanishing performance traces out a masculine/feminine binary. And if so, then it becomes interesting to ask why we define performance as disappearing at all—basically, whether we used the masculine, archivable, written object as the baseline and then defined performance as everything else. As Schneider puts it, "here in the archive, bones are given to speak the disappearance of flesh, and to script that flesh as disappearing." Schneider then suggests an alternative: archiving performance in physical memory rather than objects and documents, with the body which *performs something* functioning as a kind of 'meat' archive.

In *Archival Adventures*, we are often confronted with a house in which, we are told, many family secrets are hidden. The family itself is not there; all that remains of them is the house and all of its objects, a static archive of memories. The player then explores the house as a way of putting the flesh back onto inert archival material (or, in Schneider's terms, a feminization of the masculine). In *WRoEF*, for example, the player character and protagonist, Edith, is a 17-year-old girl and the last person alive in the cursed Finch family. She's spent the last decade avoiding her past: "But now I had questions about my family that only my house knew the answers to." Immediately, we get this familiar framing of the house as an authoritative, stable object that can stand in for the disappeared family.

But in this game, unlike in *HoER*, the memories don't remain inert—they're playable. As the player explores the house and finds ways into the locked bedrooms, they come upon a shrine to each family member who lived and died there. By interacting with the (archive-able) object on the shrine, the player triggers a flashback, in which the game's mechanics map onto that scene. In most of the game, the player uses WASD to walk forward, backward, right and left, the trackpad to look around, and click to interact with objects. But within each memory, players might use WASD to zoom a camera and click to take the photo, or WASD could control the movements of a kite. The archival object—a letter, a poem, a journal, a book—not only records the inert memory, but re-vivifies it; and the different mechanic within each memory actively draws the player's attention to each unique revitalization. Archive gives birth to a performance.

OPTIONAL BIO

Melissa Kagen is a Lecturer in Digital Media & Gaming at Bangor University. She holds a PhD from Stanford University (2016). Her current research focuses on walking

simulators, wandering, queer game studies, and intersections between participatory theatre and video games.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Fullbright Company. (2013) *Gone Home*. The Fullbright Company.

The Fullbright Company. (2017) *Tacoma*. The Fullbright Company.

Giant Sparrow. (2017) *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Giant Sparrow.

Meow Wolf Collective. *House of Eternal Return*. Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2016–present.

Phelan, P. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge, New York, 1993.

Ruberg, B., & Shaw, A. (eds). 2017. *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sam Barlow. (2015) *Her Story*. Sam Barlow.

Schneider, R. "Performance Remains" in *Journal of the Performing Arts* vol. 6, no. 2 (2001), pp. 100–108.