

“Accidental Archivists:” YouTube Gameplay Content and Game Preservation

Michele Newman

University of Washington Information School
Mary Gates Hall Suite 370
Seattle WA 98195
(206) 685-0153
mmn13@uw.edu

Jin Ha Lee

University of Washington Information School
Mary Gates Hall Suite 370
Seattle WA 98195
(206) 685-0153
jinhalee@uw.edu

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Games are more than objects; as many scholars have noted, games are an experience of play (Aarseth and Calleja 2015; Juul 2005; Newman 2011; Nylund 2015; Swalwell et al. 2019). Despite this, many of our preservation efforts to this date (Barwick et al. 2011; de Groat et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2013; McDonough et al. 2010) tend to primarily focus on preserving published console games or emulation (McDonald et al. 2021). As a consequence, there is a lack of focus on preserving the holistic experience of gaming, as well as the context of the game; for instance, the degree to which we can preserve the user’s engagement with a game beyond playing the game itself (e.g., theorizing, strategizing, creating, social play, and sharing game-related content) is severely limited because much of these experiences occur outside of the game world (Lee, et al. 2017). Additionally, there is a limitation as to how much cultural heritage institutions such as libraries, museums, and archives can preserve - there is simply not enough time or money to save every game and gameplay experience.

Acknowledging these challenges, scholars such as James Newman (2011), Henry Lowood (2011) and Niklas Nyland (2015) have suggested the potential use of player-generated content such as *walkthroughs* and *let’s plays* as a preservation solution. This type of content not only captures a wide variety of gaming experiences but also is often consistently and continuously created throughout the life cycle of the game. Furthermore, these videos are already made available online, most often on the platforms YouTube and Twitch, meaning cultural heritage institutions do not need to create them from scratch. The question then becomes: how might we use player-generated gameplay content to assist in the preservation of games?

The first step to eventually utilizing player-generated content in game preservation is to understand what types of player-generated content exist. This study acts as a first step, creating a comprehensive taxonomy based on an a document analysis of YouTube videos from English-speaking channels focused on offering game-related content. The first preliminary taxonomy was completed by a team of five researchers who regularly engage in watching this style of content on YouTube. The channels selected included those whose content fit into the following categories: mobile games (e.g., Pokémon GO 2016), sandbox games (e.g., Minecraft 2011), multiplayer online battle arena games (e.g., League of Legends 2009), triple A console games (e.g., The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2017), and multiplatform games (e.g., Genshin Impact 2020). Channels were selected based on their size (number of subscribers), longevity (2 or more years old, posting within the last year), and type of games played (not one-off games, but games with a prolonged existence, either through series or updates). The research team purposively sampled 31 YouTube channels, then randomly selected 10 videos from all videos on the channel. A total of 310 videos were assessed and coded through consensus coding in pairs (Hill et al. 2005). We plan to continue analyzing a larger number of videos from additional channels to further test, refine, and expand our taxonomy.

Through extensive discussion of the dataset, we have created a preliminary taxonomy consisting of 20 different categories of gameplay content and their definitions. While this project is still ongoing, the initial results indicate that Gameplay YouTube content creators provide a wider range of content styles suitable for complementing and expanding the existing game preservation efforts. In addition to everyday gameplay, there are many different styles of play captured by YouTube creators. Not only do these creators share their gameplay footage and walkthroughs, but they also create videos in many other aspects of game history and culture, including but not limited to:

- Collaborative play with viewers/creators/developers (play with other creators, discussions with developers, playing games with viewers or soliciting viewer feedback)
- Critical experiences reviewing game builds and strategies (e.g. character builds, exploiting game systems)
- Community logging of game bugging and reception of the technical aspects of games
- Offline experiences of gaming culture (e.g. conventions)
- The influence of games within personal life (e.g. making friends who play games, buying game merchandise)
- Game theorization and retrospectives (e.g. guessing new patches, theorizing game lore, using older games to predict new ones or new game features)
- Fan-generated re-creations in the real world (e.g., cosplay, cooking food from games)
- Discussion of game intertextuality (e.g. comparing one game to another, comparing games within the same series or developer)

These findings support the notion that in an increasingly participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), “playing a game” is more complex than simply what a gamer does in the game world. Many creators now hold the important role of “accidental archivists” who are often doing the most comprehensive job of recording the history and context of a

game. This preliminary study suggests that content creators are fans, experts at play, and hold intimate knowledge of gaming culture, which all contribute to the necessary knowledgebase for long-term preservation. While the immediate goal of this project is to explore the types of content that might be of use to institutions in the preservation of games, it also seeks to rebalance the role of institutions in game preservation and help to create a symbiotic relationship between institutions, fans, and fan-creators.

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