

***WildStar's* rogue archives: exploring an anarchaeological approach to defunct games**

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore the potential to reconstruct otherwise ‘lost’ and unplayable videogames through their paratextual remnants. The rogue and unkempt archives comprised of these remnants afford particular access, we will show, to the *feelings* and *sensations* that emerge from playing videogames. The ruins of increasing numbers of failed, forgotten and abandoned videogames collect all around us, rendered inoperable as services, servers, and circuitry are retired, discontinued, and fall into obsolescence. Conventional approaches to videogame preservation consider this a technical problem, proposing software emulation as the solution (Guttenbrunner et al. 2010; Pinchbeck et al. 2009). However, focusing solely on reproducing playable artefacts overlooks important context of use (Winget 2011), further eroding a sense of the player’s involvement in coconstituting videogame experiences (Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Morris 2003; Newman 2012).

Our proposed methodological intervention allows situated encounters of play to be reconstructed from the past by connecting in more vernacular ways to alternative modes of remembrance driven by videogame players. We modify the approach of ‘platform anarchaeology’ (Apperley and Parikka 2015)—a method for constructing speculative media histories of failed, experimental, and long-vanished platforms derived from earlier media anarchaeological approaches (Zielinski 2006)—and adapt it for videogames. The platform anarchaeological approach crystallises a means by which to “speculate on alternative yet complementary trajectories for platforms” that have failed, and uses digital ephemera to piece together “speculative, alternative, minor, and even imaginary perspectives” of platform and media experiences (Apperley and Parikka 2018, 360).

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We apply what we term a ‘paratextual archaeology’ to revisit *WildStar* (Carbine Studios 2014), a shortlived PC-based MMORPG that operated between 2014 and 2018. As ‘live’ services, the inherently complex, social, contingent and evolving qualities of MMOs such as *WildStar* provide us with an ideal case study. Siegfried Zielinski’s (2006) concept of ‘media archaeology’, from which Apperley and Parikka themselves derive their platform studies intervention, positions archaeology as a method firmly grounded in the imagination of alterity. The “archaeological search trajectory”, he notes, “privileges a sense of the multifarious possibilities over their realities” (Zielinski 2006, 27–8). Drawing on a corpus of paratexts gathered from two of *WildStar*’s player-created archives—the /r/WildStar subreddit and YouTube—we undertook multiple reconstructions of what this now-defunct MMO might have been (and *could* have been), and how it felt (or *might* have felt) to play.

Our adaptation of archaeological methods integrates the gathering and analysis of player-produced paratexts (forum threads, discussion posts, gameplay videos, etc.), embracing the capacity of these ancillary texts to capture and manifest emergent player experiences (May 2021). The capacity of an archaeology to “evoke the embodied memories and experiences of users” (Apperley and Parikka 2018, 354) meets with the “fluid, processual [and] dynamic” characteristics of digital archives (Featherstone 2006, 596). Following Abigail De Kosnik’s (2016) consideration of archival practices in the digital age, “rogue archives” appears a fitting nomenclature to describe the paratextual archives that coalesce within online player communities. Rogue because of their incidental, accidental and informal nature, often operating without official memory institutional support, whilst celebrating their status as variable, ‘living’ and fluid (see also Manning 2017). The ruins of games found within online player communities are, like other digital archives, “a knot of stories” that become “a live site of meaning-formation” (Carlin 2020, 179) as artefacts are consumed, drawn together, and accounts of play are reimagined in relation to one another.

We embraced an analytical openness encouraged by Zielinski, heeding the archaeological call for the historian to “reserve the option to gallop off at a tangent, [and] to be wildly enthusiastic” (Zielinski 2006, 27), seizing upon unexpected, speculative and multifarious visions of *WildStar* as they emerged in this process. We share in this presentation our preliminary emergent accounts of *WildStar*’s play as *felt out* within its players’ rogue archives.

This case study enables us to demonstrate how residual traces of play allow not only for the potential reconstruction(s) of a game that is no longer accessible but also to highlight the distinctive contribution of a paratext-driven archaeological method. That contribution, we argue, lies in uncovering feelings, sensations, and situated experiences surrounding videogame texts often overlooked by formal archival methods and absent from institutional archives.

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