Living Games and Digital Decay: Curating as Temporal Practice

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ABSTRACT
As museums increasingly turn to collecting video games, they confront the ontological instability of "living games"—titles that evolve through updates, expansions, and community interaction. Games such as *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011), *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017), and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) resist fixity, unfolding as iterative, networked processes rather than completed artifacts. Traditional museological approaches—rooted in stability, closure, and authenticity—are ill-equipped to engage with media designed to change, overwrite themselves, and disappear. Preserving living games therefore requires a fundamental shift in focus: from the artifact to its temporality, and specifically to its entropic dimension—the systemic decay, obsolescence, and infrastructural fragility designed into its platform existence.

Entropic temporality foregrounds the material and cultural degradation inherent to platform-based games. Dependent on server continuity, patch cycles, licensing regimes, and platform ecosystems, living games continually lose earlier versions, features, and worlds through supersession or inaccessibility. Platform studies scholars (Bogost & Montfort 2009; Apperley & Parikka 2018) emphasize that games cannot be separated from the hardware, middleware, and corporate platforms that sustain them, while Nicoll and Keogh's (2019) concept of "circuits of cultural software" demonstrates how update cycles, monetization strategies, and obsolescence are structurally embedded within platform logic. These layered dependencies render games especially vulnerable to systemic erasure caused by policy shifts, server shutdowns, or infrastructural abandonment.

Such platform-driven temporalities actively accelerate loss. *Fortnite* deletes limited-time modes; *World of Warcraft* cycles out expansions; *Destiny 2* (Bungie 2017) vaults campaigns; *P.T.* (Kojima Productions 2014) was removed from digital storefronts; *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) patched over its initial release state; and *Skyrim's* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) glitches persist as both technical residue and cultural memory. Wendy Chun's (2011) notion of the "enduring ephemeral" captures this paradox: digital media appear permanent while relying on constant maintenance to remain functional. James Newman's (2012) concept of supersession further explains how patches and updates overwrite earlier states, rendering past versions inaccessible.

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Beyond technical decay, entropic loss is profoundly cultural and affective. The shutdowns of *Club Penguin* (New Horizon Interactive 2005), *Paragon* (Epic Games 2016), and *Marvel Heroes* (Gazillion Entertainment 2013) erased not only code but also social identities, friendships, and memorial spaces. The recent documentary *The Remarkable Life of Ibelin* (Ree 2024) further demonstrates how online game worlds can function as primary sites of social life, memory, and care, revealing what is at stake when such environments disappear. In response, players engage in grassroots preservation through digital mourning, protests, fan-run servers, machinima, and archival gameplay recordings. Ritualized practices—such as the final vigil in *City of Heroes* (Cryptic Studios 2004) before its 2012 closure—highlight the affective labor through which communities sustain digital heritage. Yet these "playable archives" (Newman 2012) often exist within legal grey zones, raising unresolved questions of legitimacy and authorship.

In response to these challenges, this paper advances a preservation-as-process model grounded in *cura*—care—as a form of anti-entropic practice (Stiegler 2020), actively countering the systemic decay of digital culture through collaborative stewardship. Rather than attempting to preserve living games as fixed objects, it proposes a Modular Curatorial Platform designed to support distributed, collaborative, and temporal stewardship. The platform comprises interrelated modules, including: a versioned game archive capturing multiple builds and patches; gameplay documentation through Let's Plays, speedruns, and glitch recordings; developer and design documentation contextualizing change; community server registries linking to fan-run infrastructures; community memory archives documenting digital mourning, testimonies, and rituals; and curatorial notes that explicitly account for loss, legality, and maintenance constraints. Together, these modules enable museums to coordinate with developers, fans, and other institutions while acknowledging preservation as partial, ongoing, and relational.

By reframing curation from the safeguarding of static artifacts to the stewardship of dynamic processes, this paper argues that preserving living games requires temporal sensitivity and institutional humility. Games live, break, and vanish—but their cultural legacies persist through communities, infrastructures, and practices of care. A modular, decentralized curatorial approach redefines preservation as an ethics of care for time itself, offering museums a viable pathway to sustain the fragile, complex, and profoundly significant heritage of living games.

BIO

The author is a PhD researcher examining video games as sites for practicing temporal agency—the capacity to navigate, manipulate, and reflect on time through repetition, and consequential choice. Drawing on game studies, ecocritical theory, and ethics of care, the research examines how temporal structures such as loops and decay shape ethical and affective gameplay experiences. This paper extends that framework into the curatorial domain, exploring how care-based stewardship can address the ontological instability of living games.

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