Memory and Meaning in *Analogue: A Hate Story* and *Nier: Automata*

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INTRODUCTION
What does a save file mean? As 'gamic actions', saving and loading are generally thought to belong to what Galloway terms the 'operator' rather than the 'diegetic' sphere (2006, 37). There are, however, games (and gameplay modes) in which the implementation of the save system has implications not just for the gameplay experience but also for the game's attempts to tell a particular story, cultivate a certain atmosphere or explore specific themes, becoming 'meaningful' not just in Salen and Zimmerman's sense – that of investing the player's actions with a sense of consequence (2004, 34) – but also in the sense of eliciting reflection and interpretation.

This paper considers two such games: Christine Love's *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and *Nier: Automata* (Taro/Platinum Games 2017)**.** Both imagine science fiction futures in order to ask questions about data storage and the terms on which the past remains accessible in the present. While one is a visual novel and the other an action roleplaying game (RPG), they share a preoccupation with archiving, cultural memory and the dissemination and assimilation of 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman 1998, 2). In these games 'mechropolitics' - how videogames 'determine who may live and who may die and in what manner' (Phillips 2015, 2) - shade into mnemopolitics – whose lives are remembered, how, and by whom. This concern is a timely one in an age of 'shareveillance', characterized by the imperative to collect as much data as possible (Birchall 2016). In such a context Liam J. Bannon has argued that it may be time to abandon 'the tendency to use the power of the computer to store and archive everything' and instead develop technologies that promote practices of 'judicious forgetting' (2006, 11, 4).

This call resonates with *Analogue*. Much like Love's earlier games *Digital: A Love Story* (2010) and *Don't Take It Personally, Babe, It Just Ain't Your Story* (2011), *Analogue* is a 'desktop sim' or 'interface game', wherein the player sees on their screen what the protagonist sees on theirs. In this case, that protagonist is an investigator hired by the Saeju Colony Historical Society to recover documents from of a starship that has been drifting in space for centuries. Drawing on historical accounts of Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), Love portrays an on-ship culture that lapsed into ignorance and bigotry before being wiped out altogether, foregrounding the cultural specificity of knowledge

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while decrying the erasure of women's lives and of men's abuses of power from the historical record.

In many respects *Analogue* is about the importance of recovering and retelling stories that would otherwise be lost. It dramatizes the materiality of memory through the story of Hyun-ae, who twice uses technology to cheat death and 'save' herself: first via a cryo-sleep pod, then by merging with the ship's AI. In recovering her story players are asked to assume the role of what Leigh Gilmore calls the 'adequate witness', willing to 'resist the rush to judgment' and 'receive testimony without deforming it by doubt' (2017, 5). This task is complicated by another AI, the misogynistic Mute, who contests Hyun-ae's version of events, rendering her, in Gilmore's terms, a 'tainted witness' (ibid. 2). While players can flesh out their sense of what happened over multiple playthroughs, it is impossible to see all the files in any single run; instead we must choose who to believe and who to save – a verb that encompasses both rescuing and recording.

Nier: Automata smuggles similar questions into what initially seems like a typical 'triple A' videogame. Players fight their way across a post-apocalyptic open world, fleshing out its history and that of the player-characters (one of whom turns out to be duty-bound to suppress ugly secrets and keep her comrades in the dark) as they acquire skills, items and information over tens of hours. One of the game's multiple endings, however, gives players the option of erasing their save file in order to help fellow players struggling to defeat a particularly grueling boss. Given the way that writable storage has catalyzed an 'RPGificaton' of games in general (Gallagher 2017, 179-80), making the promise of amassing levels, loot and gear central to understandings of good game design, the idea of an RPG urging players to erase everything is striking, if not outright iconoclastic, and sparked much discussion among players. Some felt a sense of loss and regret after deleting their saves; others felt liberated from the compulsion to '100%' the game and collect everything; others still were moved to reflect on the game's 'message', and on the terms on which we remember games. Proving save systems can be meaningful, the moment raises important questions, not only for gamer culture - which has, over the past decade, become ever keener on remakes and remasters, even as scholars call for more nuanced attention to which gaming histories are (re)told (Swalwell, Ndalianis and Stuckey 2017, 5) - but for digital culture more generally.

OPTIONAL BIO

Rob Gallagher is a postdoctoral researcher with King's College London's Ego-Media project. His work draws on critical theory to address the role of digital technologies in fostering new conceptions of identity and forms of self-presentation. He is the author of *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2017).

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