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Fabian Lorenz Winter ⓘD

ABSTRACT

This study examines video games' depictions of archival architectures in levels and practices of interacting with archival material such as looting. By doing this, the article proposes a processual idea of proper archives and virtual counterparts, both determined by various moments of interplay, such as opening treasure chests, boxes, or cells. Archived artifacts, hidden in games to be discovered, lure players to begin interplay, and are a crucial part of the labyrinthic archival ecosystem. Examining video game archives enhances the perception of archival ecosystems from the interplay with institutional archives, and the archived material in general. In video games, archives becoming media if someone recursively interacts with and within the entangled ecosystems of levels and loot.

Introduction

Between infrastructures and actions of the archive, tensions of withdrawal, discovery accessibility and inaccessibility are constantly negotiated. The central argument is that both the archive and the archived are influenced by their environment and by a set of cultural techniques, like collecting, registering, storing, or preserving. This article is written out of the belief that archival environments in video games, and their possibilities for interaction can expand our understanding of the (proper) archive as a medium. This basic assumption will be supported by different strands of investigation, followed by a conclusion at the end of this paper. However, before discussing the segmentation of this article, the present understanding of some recurring terms should be discussed briefly. Likewise, this introduction will examine the selected objects of study and comment on the media theoretical-method used.

In varying degrees of intensity, the following article draws on the terms "archive," "archival ecosystem," "cultural techniques," and "ontological operations." With the archive term, as a rule, formations are discussed that define institutionally according to specific rules and regulations what is stored as archive material to last for an unknown (deep) future (Parikka 2017) and who has access to this material. This perspective on the political implications of the archive has quite rightly been a recurring theme in reflections on the archive in the humanities (Foucault 2002; Ebeling and Günzel 2016). However, this relevant understanding of the archive can be extended, no less relevantly, to include existential and aesthetic dimensions. Cultural techniques that produce the institutional archive through specific processes,

however, also enable the construction of non-institutional archives. So, neither the archive's representation (or later: simulation) nor the archival ecosystem resembles the institutional archive in total. However, since all three terms exhibit significant overlap in the fundamental cultural techniques that determine their modes of existence (Latour 2013; Schmidgen 2016), this article shifts the focus of the entanglement of archive theory and archives in video games to precisely those "ontological operations" of the archive.

Instead of deductively applying a specific analysis method or placing it in a singular theoretical building, selected phenomena found in video games are used inductively as a starting point. For this reason, the video game examples brought forward should not be taken as an exhaustive representation of an "archive genre" of video games. Instead, the phenomena of selected video games—including *Soul Calibur 2*, *Fallout 3*, and *Minecraft*—are intended to provide initial starting points for the debate, which can be supplemented in the future by further, also more detailed, individual case studies—for example, concerning the architectures of *GoldenEye 007* or *Control*. In this way, a processual understanding of archival environments is contoured. The argumentation of the primary and secondary theses is thereby significantly, but not exclusively, supported by the idea of operative ontologies and Derrida's concept of the archive.

Similar to video games "broken down into smaller elements or *chunks* of gameplay" (Zagal, Fernández-Vara, and Mateas 2008, 176), this study is segmented, too. The first section examines how archives are represented in levels in games such as *Soul Calibur*

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2 or *Fallout 3*. Archives and libraries are primarily used as background settings of certain levels in video games, rather than playing an "active role" in the diegetic universe. Regarding theories of space construction and segmentation of video game levels, their definition as merely a passive backdrop environment has been challenged. Nevertheless, archives sometimes interact in video games in a broader sense with the story and the player when used as levels. The second section addresses various issues with the analogy between proper archival material and video game loot and proposes a more media ecological conception of archives. In this case, the loot of video games is not equivalent but is related to the archive material, in which symbolic, imaginary, and actual constitution changes by interactions. The two sections conclude that understanding the video game ecosystem as an archive will discuss looting-based games as particular forms of interaction within the archive(d). Therefore, the ontic operations of the archive are not limited to the cultural techniques of storing and preserving (the game designer's job) but simultaneously include interplay with the stored and preserved (the user's task). Overall, the paper's central concern is not to define the proper way to represent archives in video games, or even what might qualify a phenomenon as an archive, but to inaugurate a debate concerning diverse ideas of archives in video games, their occurrence, implied theory of the archive, and their recursion to archival ecosystems beyond video games.

The archive as the delivery room for media studies

> [It] was not passion for theory that made renegade humanities scholars focus their attention on media as the material substrate of culture but archival obsession.(Siegert 2013, 51)

This study investigates the occurrence of archives in video games and how their existence becomes relevant for interplay with archival levels and loots, both inside and outside of video games. Moreover, this study explicates how interaction with archives in video games can stimulate an epistemic shift and aid in a more comprehensive understanding of the archives of cultural techniques (Winthrop-Young 2013). To do so, this article does not comment on a genre debate of video games or whether a specific—but inadequate (Clarke, Lee, and Clark 2017)—labeling like "archive game" might be developable with the article's conclusion. Nevertheless, to understand particular interactions with and within archives overall, understanding the occurrence of archives in video game ecosystems is crucial because they focus more on material interaction than on preserving aspects.

Therefore, this study provides a broad outline of archives chosen in video games that imply divergent understandings of the term "archive." This involves understanding institutions for preserving the unique—whatever this might be—and such understanding as a milieu emerging from distinct practices. The latter belief is relatable to Joseph Vogl's theory of "becoming-media," according to which tools, techniques, or devices are not just media *as such* but become media by interaction. To use media technology, in Vogl's case, the telescope, with an epistemological or aesthetic result, is an essential operation where an instrument becomes media:

> In each case of becoming-media—as when series of letters become writing or polished lenses become an optical instrument—the transformation of apparatuses, symbolic orders, or institutions comes about through a specific assemblage of diverse conditions, factors, and elements. For the future of media studies, I would like to suggest that we should set aside any general concept of media in favor of examining historically singular constellations in which we can identify the metamorphosis into media of things, symbolic systems, or technologies. (Vogl 2007, 23)

Relating this idea to the archive as a place of accumulation, preservation, processing, and returning historical records means widening the understanding of the archive from its physical facilitation. In this institutional place, official shielded data are located in cultural techniques that transform the symbolic orders of documents to archive material (Ebeling and Günzel 2016). Nevertheless, reading the archive as an institution also contributes a relevant distinction to other institutions, such as libraries or museums. This distinction is usually based on the purpose of the institution. As Wolfgang Ernst states: "Contemporary archival theory emphasizes, quite deliberately, the connection between court-oriented registrars and the contents of historical archives where the files serve an administrative rather than an historiographical purpose: this constitutes a misuse (in its most neutral sense)—a misreading of the archive" (Ernst 2015, 1). According to this belief, the archive's function is to preserve (unique or historical) records for admirative, not historiographical reasons. In a colloquial understanding, the library's function is to enable access to accumulated knowledge, and the museum's function is to exhibit and teach knowledge. All these explanations by function are more or less as meager as video game genres. However, they nevertheless correlate with both the global idea of an archive and the etymological origins of the archive term, directing to the Greek *arkhē*, meaning office, or government and *arkhō*, meaning to begin or to rule (Vismann 2008, 43).

Considering the archive as an institution and the phenomena of becoming an archive by cultural

techniques, the spectrum of video games included in this investigation consists of video game versions of proper archive architectures, apparent in *Fallout 3*, and the less likely modes of archives identified in games like *Minecraft*. Before embarking on a discussion of particular enigmas concerning individual games, it is essential to note that this paper argues from an interest in the aesthetics of archives. Therefore, rather than declaring expertise in the study of video game culture, this article's primary aim is to understand the different ways of building, using, and understanding archive interplay in video games to stimulate the debate on specific cultural techniques that let "the archive" become media. While a recursion to media studies of the archive is intended, this work seeks to contribute to the argument for video games as epistemic media for a more profound perception of the archives' socio-cultural dimensions too. Thus, without presenting at this point a conclusive assembly of archival environments in video games and extrapolating these case studies to a notion of the archive in general—vis versa, without being able to offer a complete media theory with which to expound the relationship of archival environments in video games to proper archives, both sides of the discussion must mutually constitute themselves. The mutual becoming of theory and practice finds a similar correspondence in the formation of (or a) notion of archive between digitized (video game) and "real world." It is crucial to problematize the "real" here (unlike in its distinction from the symbolic) to the digital or the video game, even if one archive is a proper archive and the other an archival environment. Without going into too much detail here, Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory seems quite promising for discussing this relationship further. Even though it has been noted that until 2007, video game studies have so far hardly referred to Baudrillard's theories (Simon 2007, 355), there are already first attempts to apply his simulation theory to current conditions of existence.

Baudrillard's analysis of the impact of mass media on the cultural present primarily addresses television since the late 1970s. However, it can be applied to video game cultures and may counter-intuitive divisions between "real world" archive buildings and "simulated" archives in video games. At the core of Baudrillard's analysis is his simulation theory, according to which, any distinction between sign and referent has become obsolete. There is no actuality or truth behind the respective mass media of a society (anymore), to which these very media would refer. According to Baudrillard, we live in the age of simulation, and Engell explains this Baudrillardian statement further: "Simulation does not have to be imagined as a mere fiction, illusion or deception, which always remains transparent and

is, as it were, contract-based. Unlike the latter, simulation no longer knows an external world, an external reference, and therefore cannot be unmasked." (Engell 2019, 363) Therefore, according to Baudrillard, simulation is that state in which signs are not distinguished from anything outside their signs. "The principle of representation of a preexisting world by signs, which characterizes modernity, and the principle of simulation of a world preceded by signs are in conflict. Simulation becomes and is a counterforce to representation." (Engell 2019, 381) Or, in Baudrillard's words: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, meta-stable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes." (Baudrillard 1994, 2)

The sign-theoretical dilemma of the present that Baudrillard points out makes it impossible to speak of the video game archive as representing a "real archive" in absolute terms: The real is not (anymore) existent in this absolute form, because it now exists besides, with and through its simulation (Baudrillard 1994, 19). Patrick Crogan has pointed out the exciting twist that Baudrillard's simulation theory opens up for computer games as simulations: "Perhaps the most important thing Jean Baudrillard leaves to computer games studies in the form of his writings is the challenge they put to any project starting from such a conceptualization of games as simulations. This has been—inevitably, I would say—a major thrust in the explosion of video game theory in recent years, along with the (implicitly simulation-based) treatment of computer games as cybernetic systems engaging their users in interactive models of phenomena real or imaginary." (Crogan 2007, 405) The question of a real or imaginary to which the simulation refers is thus far less productive than the actual interaction with the respective environment, be it gamers in cybernetic systems or archivists in administrative institutions. Here a bridge can be built back to explore specific cultural techniques, i.e. those techniques in the Aristotelian sense that produce culture. Understanding cultural techniques is necessary to comprehend the later-discussed term "ontic operations."

The concept of cultural techniques was first employed in agricultural contexts in the 19th century. This is noteworthy because the present use of cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*) within "German Media Theory" refers to specific chains of operations (Schüttpelz 2006) linking media, things, human and nonhuman, and therefore precedes any nature/culture distinction (Siegert 2013, 62).

> Thus the concept of cultural techniques clearly and unequivocally repudiates the ontology of philosophical concepts. Humans *as such* do not exist independently of cultural techniques of hominization, time *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of time measurement, and space *as such* does not exist independently of cultural techniques of spatial control. This does not mean that the theory of cultural techniques is anti-ontological; rather, it moves ontology into the domain of ontic operations. (Siegert 2013, 56–57)

Following Siegert, archives *as such* do not exist independently of their cultural techniques. Storing old and unique documents and preserving them is a cultural technique of the archive. These ontic operations of "archive events" (Derrida 2001) change the archived material by archiving or processing the archived in preservation. According to Derrida, the archive event changes the archived materials in the act of archiving them or processing the archived in preservation; in the archive, these documents are not only records but also objects within a new (imaginary, symbolic, and real) reference system. Siegert states that for the history of early "Kulturtechnikforschung" in Germany, using the "Foucauldian archive" became essential for extracting particular media history (e.g. telescope, paper, postal system) "from arcane sources (arcane, that is, from point of view of the traditional humanities) at a time when nobody had yet seriously addressed the concept of media" (Siegert 2013, 51). Accordingly, addressing media technology as continuously entangled with the practices making the real—the Human, time, space—ontic operations prefaces this reality. It merely requires the touch of an inverted "archival obsession" to loop cultural techniques and ontic operations of media with archives in video games to embellish how this peculiar material will recurse the archives' symbolic and real dimensions globally.

Levels: archives and libraries as wallpaper and stages

An instructive starting point for analyzing archives in video games is their appearance as a background setting, stage, or level. The authors of the 2008 published article "Rounds, Levels, and Waves" recognize three general types of gameplay segmentation: temporal, spatial, and challenge (Zagal, Fernández-Vara, and Mateas 2008). The specific forms of temporal segmentation, such as turn-taking, rounds, and time limits, seem to be less axiomatic for analyzing the occurrence of archives in video games. Analyzing spatial segmentations and challenge segmentations offers a stimulating framework to exemplify archives in video games. However, before correlating the archive-as-a-level with the archive-as-a-challenge, both kinds of video game interplay need clarification.

Hence, this section begins with the first segmentation in video games prompted by the phenomenon of archives as levels. "What helps distinguish a level from other forms of spatial segmentation is the discontinuity in gameplay and in space between one level and another; the more evident the discontinuity, the greater the notion of level" (Zagal, Fernández-Vara, and Mateas 2008, 183). Fighting games, a subgenre of action games, such as *Tekken, Mortal Kombat*, or *Soul Calibur*, are recognized for their fighting-oriented gameplay, rather than what they offer in player interaction with the environment. The particular fighting stages chunk the gameplay accordingly the functions of the different levels in these fighting games have either more or fewer background settings. These games sometimes offer opportunities to interact with elements of the setting, mainly by throwing or smashing particular items. However, most gameplay takes place in front of and is separate from the background. Therefore, the players are largely limited to horizontal movement set to the scene's foreground. Players use their controller to move the game characters, but their only option is to move them left, right, or up and down (i.e. jumping and crouching). The players lack access to the depth of the environment, but this is compensated by a wandering camera view of the scene. Regarding video games with archive settings, their wallpapered background often remains an inactive and inaccessible backdrop in the context of gameplay.

In 2002′s *Soul Calibur 2*, a relatively stereotypical representation of a private library in video games was used to set the "South France Mansion—Library" level. The wiki that *Soul Calibur* enthusiasts created provides some additional information on this particular setting, explaining that the library in which the characters do nothing but fight each other is the home of a character named Raphael. This fan-wiki states (without offering any additional sources) that in the storyline of the game, the original master of the "South France Mansion" is no longer alive: "The rich lord that lived here was poisoned, and the man who lived here since left this place recently. [...] It is said that the man did not come out of this library until the day he left on his journey. Surprisingly, there are no traces on the bookshelves or anywhere else in the room that give a clue to what the man was doing in this place" (Anonymous 2008, 2018). Without access to further detail, anyone can assume that this last occupant of the library was not a fighter but used the private library as a source of information that could not be found anywhere else (or at least in this particular collection). Fan-wiki reveals the library's established narrative and sets the archive as a place for unique and rare clues that will aid in solving questions and problems encountered "outside of the archive" (Derrida 1996, 11). Being limited to

horizontal movements in front of the scenery, *Soul Calibur 2* constructs space through movement, regardless of whether this movement is in front of an archive, library, or other representation.

Karla Theilhaber points out that in video games, "the construction of space is an active process, a part of the game" (Theilhaber 2019, 61). In her understanding of the spatiality of video games, there are no passive backgrounds because these backgrounds always interrelate with the played avatar: "If the avatar is walking in a certain way and direction, the game space is depicted accordingly, that means the avatar's point of view and his environment is the game space" (Theilhaber 2019, 61). Thus, if the moving avatar co-determines the space of its movement, the game segment level is never absolutely passive, even if the degree of interplay varies greatly. However, the degree of interaction with what is commonly understood as an archive is not decided by the form of representation of the archive, which is widely imagined in a rather neoclassical style, as in *Soul Calibur*'s "South France Mansion."

Archives and libraries in other video game genres tend to look similarly as an extensive tumbler collection of libraries (and archives) in video games shows (Anonymous 2022). They are used, more or less, as a neoclassical setting with full bookshelves, open space for reading (or fighting), stone columns, curved stairs, and a book-filled gallery. One of the first studies to examine the representation of archives in video games was performed by Thaler et al. Their study lists the "The Duke's Archives" mission in the medieval-based game *Dark Souls*, along with the "Boston Public Library" depicted in *Fallout 4*, as some of their "favorite" instances of "games featuring archives" (Thaler, Weston, and Davis 2017, 7). Another excellent example of how libraries and archives are often represented is the "The Great Archive" level in the puzzle game and visual novel, *Professor Layton vs Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. In this game, interplay with records is at least integrated into the storyline. Thus, there are levels in video games that include archives that are accurate representations—or, to speak with Baudrillard, simulations—of proper archives. As Hannah Awcock points out, the open-world game *Fallout 3* offers the chance to access a video game version of the National Archives of the USA, which is based in a post-nuclear Washington, D.C. Awcock states that "obviously the building is looking a little the worse for wear after 250 years and a nuclear apocalypse, but it is much the same in the game as it is in real life, right down to those awkward microfiche machines that have dogged many an archival researcher. The player can embark on a quest to retrieve a copy of the Declaration of Independence from the archive's basement, copies of which are held in the real National Archives" (Awcock 2015). As an institution, the National Archives version in *Fallout 3* is not only an accurate representation of the National Archives in Washington but are also a more conventional simulation of an archive as an administrative institution.

In contrast to the accessibility of the archived material and the accessibility of the archive building itself, the interaction possibilities of the archive users generally correspond more to the limited access to the archived material, as depicted in *Soul Calibur 2*, than to a self-service store like in *Fallout 3*. For example, material consultations must be justified, original documents are not released for conservation reasons, or the limited space in the well-controlled reading room is fully booked—a struggle neither the avatar in *Soul Calibur* nor *Fallout* knows. Or do they know it? Is the struggle in the "South France Mansion" level pausing at the doorstep of the archive Kafkaesque? Are the locked doors, precious loot boxes, and labyrinthine corridors in a post apocalyptic National Archives represented precisely because their processing by the player is the only remaining cultural technique, which makes this archive an archive? Archive interaction allowing the player to move around links the proper archives with those depicted in the video games, both of which include both accessible and inaccessible areas, and, of course, ways to hack or glitch them (Scheider 2020).

Loot: finding something to begin

One form of interaction available in many video games is looting. Regarding video games, this term describes collecting valuable items, called loots, by picking them up during gameplay. Loots may be found, for example, on and around defeated enemies or in treasure chests, which can be seen as "archival agents" (Winter 2020). The *Fallout 3* version of the National Archives includes several items available for looting. For example, in a locked safe in an upstairs room, six archived prize vouchers are waiting to be taken, which can be achieved by using a lock pick or hacking the administrator's terminal. Further, players can access different books, such as the fictional skill-books, *Tales of a Junktown Jerky Vendor* and *Lying, Congressional Style*, or a video game version of the non-fictional Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence, both of which are archival materials stored at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. (both in the non-game and game world). Many other items, useful and useless, can be found in the *Fallout 3* version of the National Archives, which presents a textbook example of looting as an archive interaction. The open-world setting of video games such as *Fallout 3* allows players to pursue offside (or off-mission) tasks by strolling around and seeking items

in the archive that can initiate a new playing goal. Several main and side quests segment Open-world games such as *Fallout 3*, but strolling around, looting stored items to interact with (or not) is also a valid option playing these games. It is possible to connect the archive-as-a-level with the cultural techniques of the archive-as-a-challenge, which is primarily to find something searched for and, even better, find something unexpected. Moreover, is it not often that unexpected findings afford unique interactions? The unexpected finding becomes the beginning of an alternative timeline (Farge 2013).

The media-theoretical exploration of the archive opens up the possibility of re-accentuating interactions with "Loot" away from a current much-discussed (and relevant) problematization of archival objects originating from colonial collection practices (Steedman 2002). Thus, in addition to an archival-epistemological approach (Stoler 2009) or a material-archaeological method (Parikka 2015; Ebeling 2016), a media-theoretical exploration of the archived can be launched here through its present environment and possible interaction. Performance theory could prove to be an essential cue for this approach, claiming—similar to Siegfried Zielinski for media theory (Zielinski 2014, 2019)—an ontological status as a performative artwork (Osthoff 2009) and repeatedly highlighting the processual character of the archive in concrete case studies (Büscher 2016; Büscher and Cramer 2013, 2021). Focusing on contemporary performance practices, the Media Archive Performance Journal (*MAP*) offers a broad range of case studies of the relation between archives and performance art. In their introduction in the very last publication, the editors provide a brief definition of processual archives: "A processual archive allows ever more, different readings of documents and holdings, according to the respective inquiries of the researchers, artists, or activists. This mode of archival work yields provisional findings, which correlate with and/or react to the subjectivities of those conducting it. The archive itself becomes subjective, both in terms of the processes by which it is created and the insights it offers." (Büscher and Cramer 2021) When considering the archive as the beginning and reflecting on its creational agency, archives in video games can additionally be found through cultural techniques, such as linking bookshelves or treasure chests to the user, who interacts with these objects through looting. However, this analogy does not consider some apparent objections. Foremost, the standard approach to the consultation of archival material lies under a strict behavior protocol that ensures that the archival material will return safely to the repository without being "looted." Meanwhile, video games like *Minecraft* are essentially games in which the primary task is to stroll, loot the world, and construct

a new one with the loot. As *Minecraft* shows, the creative process of consigning items to forge a new beginning lies in the context of the looting. Wolf elaborates on this aesthetic interplay using the game developer's decision to downscale the elements of the in-game environment:

> Games like [Minecraft] deal with the problem of repetition by moving it [the problem of repetition] to a smaller scale; instead of the same trees or buildings, their worlds are composed of variations of blocks combined in endless ways. This granularity also allows users to build and destroy more easily, since construction and deconstruction is simplified down to the appearance or disappearance of blocks. While the graphics of these games are simpler and more stylized (something which the retro movement in gaming has made more acceptable to contemporary audiences who are used to photorealistic graphics), the possibilities inherent in the interactivity available far outweighs the aesthetic tradeoffs for many gamers (Wolf 2019, 307).

One point to consider is that the expansion of archives stands in direct constellation with the understanding of archival material as a source of evidence or the start of an interaction. If the latter understanding implies that archived material is not proof of something articulated but rather a starting point for articulation (available interactivity for the users), the *Minecraft*-archive-analogy goes further. Since March 2020, *Minecraft* has become more than an online platform through which players can interact with looted material; it has also become a platform for banned journalism where prohibited articles can be stored and remain accessible within the so-called "Uncensored Library." *Minecraft* comprises different servers and maps that players can either connect with online or download and implement into their video game ecosystem. Reporters Without Borders released the "Uncensored Library" map to create a virtual library and archive for recent journalism banned in different countries.

As mentioned above, simulations of archives and libraries in video games tend to have a neoclassical look, and the "Uncensored Library" is no different. There are individual wings in its virtual architecture, which the makers created using over 12.5 million blocks. Inside this virtual library, one can find banned articles in their original language and English translations. An interesting connection is created through this *Minecraft* map, which joins the banned articles, their virtual form as in-game book items, and, of course, their accessibility via the "Uncensored Library"—a connection that renders porous borders between on- and offline worlds. In contrast to the loot hidden in games like *Fallout*, archived and accessible articles in the "Uncensored Library" are available to countless readers who can continue (or, in some cases, begin) debates and

discussions concerning censorship and unjust punishment.

Concerning archives in video games and moments of interaction with archives, the "Uncensored Library" is an excellent example of shifting the understanding of the archive from its institutional (*arkhē*) to a processual (*arkhō*) ontology. The "Uncensored Library" yields a "Labyrinth of Truth" in the "Vietnam" wing, which is designed as an embodiment of a maze. This symbolic architecture is placed beside a cage centered in the "Saudi Arabia" wing and beside gravestones in the "Mexico" wing that memorialize journalists who have been killed. Besides the Press Freedom Index, the annual ranking of press freedom in global countries published by Reporters Without Borders, and a COVID-19 room, the library additionally holds over 200 books and articles, now archived as digital items in *Minecraft*.

Conclusion

Suppose archives in video games are not limited to backgrounds or (post apocalyptic) representations of official institutions serving (administrative) archive functions, and they also occur in the archival interplay within levels and loot. Why not speak about the archive as a video game genre? It seems that looting as a cultural technique of interacting and creating the archive *as such* might challenge the centrism of video game genres on their broader narrative components because the *archive* is queer to categories such as action, adventure, simulation, or strategy. As Clarke et al. state, "video games are more than their narrative components: video games are interactive processes. Yet contemporary video game genre labels and classification systems fail to capture the novel complexity inherent in these games" (Clarke, Lee, and Clark 2017, 446). Cultural techniques of the archive are incorporated into a wide variety of video games; laid out by the game designers executed by the game players—they are recursive chains of ontic operations that find no narrative equivalent in any archive game. Conversely, the cultural techniques of the archive operate across genre classification, as Clarke et al. highlight it for *Minecraft*: "The mix of components from action, strategy, adventure, and survival genres in this game gets *MineCraft* tagged with almost every genre label available for games [...]" (Clarke, Lee, and Clark 2017, 453). Further, Alison Gazzard discusses the genre debate in video games, regarding Mark J.P. Wolf's classic *The Medium of the Video Game* (Wolf 2002): "In Wolf's discussions of genre, he states that the focus of genre is usually 'subject matter' rather than the 'role of the audience'" (Gazzard 2013, 9). This idea of deducing video games' ontology by their given genre, not by

interacting within these games, is counterintuitive regarding ontic operations.

However, in their *Game Ontology Project*, Zagal et al. used a computer science-based ontology term rather than a philosophical understanding of ontologies: "An ontology in this sense is different from a game taxonomy in that, rather than organizing games by their characteristics or elements, it is the elements themselves that are organized" (Zagal, Fernández-Vara, and Mateas 2008, 176). This kind of ontology "abstracts away the representational details of games. [...] The ontology helps position the more formal or structural elements of the game within the game design space, which is not incompatible with incorporating our terminology with critical analyses or sociological studies of videogames" (Zagal, Fernández-Vara, and Mateas 2008, 177). However, such a game ontology is conceptualized to explain video games *as such* by particular structures laid out by the game designers. Of course, this is a crucial point to investigate how code becomes a video game and how writing creates space. Nevertheless, analyzing cultural techniques and ontic operations producing the real rather than defining what makes a video game a video game shows recursions of video game interplay to institutional archive settings. As Joanna Barwick et al. aptly pointed out, the research on video games feeds into the question of how to archive them adequately. Thus, in order to research video games, researchers must have access to historical video games in the present and future. However, what should be archived if the video game itself is first produced in the game through specific cultural techniques (i.e. has no ontically distinct position)? "Immersion and interaction are key features of digital games, and to fully appreciate them, it is necessary to understand that they are designed to be played. These issues will be equally important when considering the preservation of digital games" (Barwick, Dearnley, and Muir 2011, 374). If playing the video game is to be researched as an ontic operation, the archive, or rather the decision of what is archived in what way, and how someone can interact with the archive(d), falls on the epistemic horizon of this research. Should a video game experience be authentically archived in order to be able to uncover this media archaeology in the future? These follow-up questions no longer concern the genre archive but the relation of archives and platforms of video games, which is comparable to the research on the repercussions of the archive material on the archived (texts, games, etc.). For this venture, the combination of platform studies and media archaeology, proposed by Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka (Apperley and Parikka 2018) seems to be an excellent opportunity to understand the video game through the archive and vice versa. Conversely,

Barwick quite rightly reminds us that exploring the authentic gaming experience (not intended by media archaeology) is ultimately a phantasm.

> Players who approach games from a different context will experience the games differently. In 50 years time, these games will not be experienced in the same way that a player experiences them today: their context will be completely different. This demonstrates that the museums have a lot of unanswered questions in relation to the best way forward for their collections. (Barwick, Dearnley, and Muir 2011, 383)

The archive, both in the video game and in its institutional constitution (for example, to preserve video games), must consider the lines of potential and future access to what is archived. This circumstance is not just a logistical hurdle; both spheres have already excellently established finding aids and signatures, loot boxes, and other means of interaction laid out by archivists and game designers. It is an ontological difficulty to generate these access points so that the archived is perceived in its moment of interaction as part of the accessible present and part of an inaccessible past. The emphasis on ontic operations that produce the archive in the video game by user interaction as much as those that design this environment leads to the realization that the process of archiving is not just an accumulation of software and hardware, information, and information carriers.

Thus, the dynamic is a constantly (and at times abruptly) changing of archives ecologies, computer games, or any other mode of existence. This archive term leads to the assumption that it is impossible to define archive existence *as such*, but only to describe those cultural techniques that allow something to exist in a certain way. These video game mechanisms that create the archive in and outside the video game are changing correlations between game design and player interactions, architecture and user, protocol, and process. From the archive to the video game and its interaction (gameplay), one can ask: Which video game archive is produced by which cultural techniques? Is it an archive of mummified artifacts (is there such an archive?) or one of unlimited access (should there be such an archive?)? Dealing with archival material, the archive, and the archival situation will always be negotiated somewhere in the interstice between withdrawal, discovery, accessibility, and non-accessibility. Here, it is a matter of mastering the level architecture and looting useable material.

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