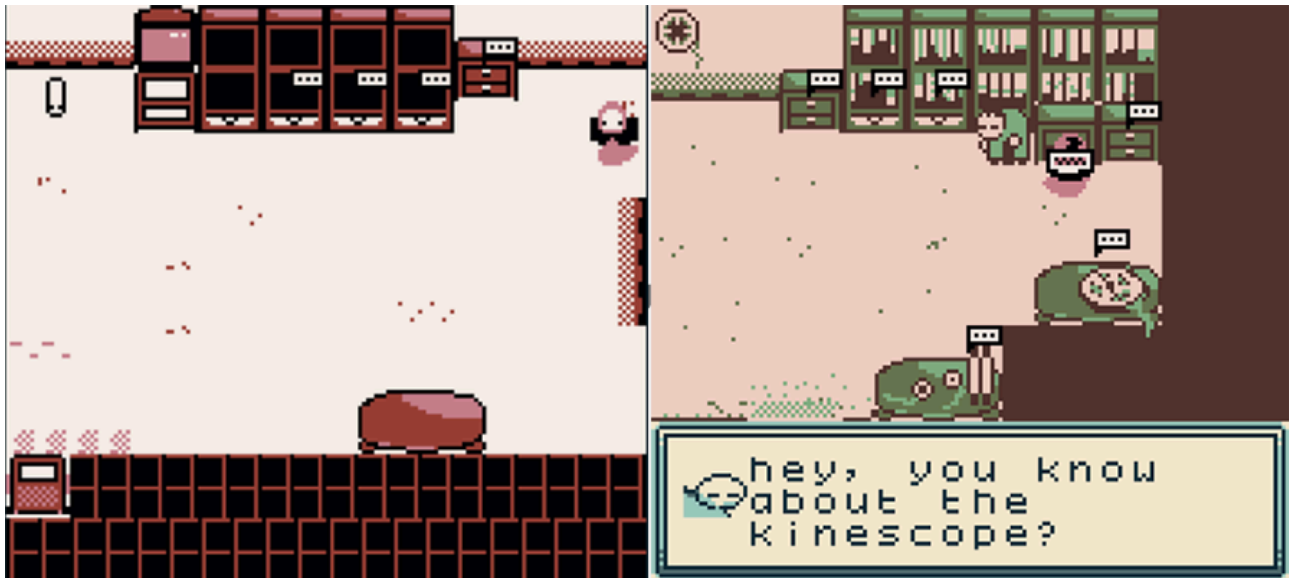


Archive 0.333 Videogame

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Abstract: Archive 0.333 is a speculative fiction game that uses critical making to explore themes of post-humanity and media archiving. Players assume the role of an unnamed protagonist maintaining a small peer-to-peer network and gathering digital artifacts to share. Through gameplay, the project prompts reflection on the ethics and practices of archiving. An accompanying essay expands on these ideas, focusing on the archival challenges of GameBoy games and other media. It draws from media archaeology and examines how corporations like Nintendo preserve their own digital materials while restricting public access. In contrast, online communities rely on emulation to keep legacy games playable. Together, the game and essay question the effectiveness of corporate archival efforts and advocate for the vital role of independent archivists in preserving cultural memory.

Tags: Demo, Process Research, Archiving, Dystopia

1 A Gamic Consideration of Archives

A lone humanoid figure traverses a dying landscape in search of artifacts. Their hooded appearance hides the fact that they have little connection to a human-like those that the humanoid was told to rediscover. They can understand the record that they pick up as a thing that plays audio or encourages and mediated engagement with it. Yet, without the aid of the humanoid's partner, the network remains inaccessible. They can reconnect with others, but they cannot save. Time is a repetitive motion of events focused on the discovery of more artifacts for others. The game is stuck in a loop without the ability to access the inventory of artifacts collected throughout the experience.



Game Operation: **WSAD** for move, **J** for confirm

Archive 0.333, the game described in the opening paragraph's scene, follows NETWORK as they travel through a post-apocalyptic environment collecting items and reconnecting archivists to their network. The protagonist is no longer fully human and depends on a P2P network and their portable laptop, NOTEBOOK or NB, to keep a record of their memories. They do maintenance for the "Archival Network" that brings several specialists together to keep track of humanity's traces. At the center of this iteration of the game, 0.333, are the considerations of archives, digital peers, and bodies.

Archive 0.333, a project questioning archives in a post-apocalyptic world, engages with direct questioning of its theme through the use of a game engine that attempts to break open a closed development system. GBStudio, an independent game engine designed by Chris Maltby, engages with older closed systems of development found in the original GameBoy platform. The GBStudio community explores and builds upon the code that Maltby borrows to update the engine, which is currently on its second version (2.00 Beta 4), and then continues building upon the original

affordances Maltby provides in GBStudio. However, and most importantly, the game engine taps into the ability to create games for a platform that Nintendo has not shown outward support for; instead of archiving GameBoy games en masse, they have remade games for the platform to resell them, like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid* releases during the 2010s. The GameBoy platform and its games are only accessible through physical versions and a digital archive through the Nintendo 3DS—or players can utilize ROMs to play these older games. However, Nintendo protects its intellectual property and actively pushes its consumer out of production or archiving. Alex Custodio writes that Nintendo’s development for their handheld platforms remains closed by not “publicly providing instructions on how to develop software for the platform” (*Custodio, 2020*). GBStudio elicits an open system by being freely available and allowing the creation of barebones games that could be played in browsers or on the GameBoy platform.

With this mechanical configuration, Archive 0.333 highlights the theory and discussions about archiving in service of a larger narrative in ways that elicit a ‘metagame’ and explore what it means to make a game that explores scholarly musings (*Boluk & LeMieux, 2017*). As the player acts as NETWORK doing maintenance of the Archival Network (ANP2P), the player can consider their own surroundings as it relates to the game’s configuration. The fact that the player has to keep up with maintenance displays a struggling temptation with the fragile network between the archivists in the game. In this way, the game remediates infrastructures and archives within the game and the game engine that mediate time and space through “sometimes-fragile apparatuses” (*Packer, 2010*). There’s a direct consideration of the archive’s own flimsiness to the harsh surroundings of minimal interaction with other living things in the environment of the game. Archive 0.333 positions the player in a dense environment with elaborate characters who participate in archiving objects found by the player as NETWORK.

2 Navigating the World and (Re)Discovering the Archivists

The primary goal of interacting with the environment of Archive 0.333 remains to find the other archivists and reconnect them to the ANP2P. In this, I want to highlight an important aspect of the archives within the game itself. By mirroring a peer-to-peer (P2P) network for the archive, I want to suggest a way of collaborative archives of “intermedia” (*Rossoni & Blankenship, 2013*). Gene Youngblood writes in the discussion of cinema and perception, “The cinema isn’t just something inside the environment; the intermedia network of cinema, television, radio, magazines, books, and newspapers is our environment, a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism. It establishes meaning in life, creates mediating channels between man and man, man and society” (*Rogers, 2013*). This is important in the world of Archive 0.333 because the player will traverse an environment littered with old media in search of archivists of each of these mediums in order to continue a network of archived materials. In engagement, the project will force players to perceive game spaces and digital archives in a way that gets their own bodies involved within the world of the game (*Keogh, 2018*). The player considers the collection of the media in the environment when they can reach it will also explore the desolate landscape of the gamespace.

Though video game is the primary medium of engagement, the eerie absence of music of the game, dense text dialogue found in the home of the characters, and the short clip of “The End” housed in one specific place forces the player to consider their place and role within an intermedia network and its archives.

When a player exits the Portable Home of NETWORK, they are found with two options: go left or go right. Games near the start of development on the GameBoy, such as Super Mario Land (1989), would force players to go right. In countering that, adventure games, like The Legend of Zelda: Link’s Awakening (1993) or Metroid II: Return of Samus, reward players for daring to go left after established traditions. For the essay, let’s follow going left. Immediately following the choice is another choice: up or down. The procedure is asking the player to keep choosing directions, orienting them into the fear of getting lost. The environment, decorated with dying foliage and a clear delineation of paths is forboding on the player. Gibson (2018) explores perceptions within an environment as disorienting because of several factors: “The fact of an environment that is mainly rigid but partly nonrigid, mainly motionless but partly movable, a world that is both changeless in many respects and changeable in others but is neither dead at one extreme nor chaotic at the other, is of great importance for our inquiry” (*Gibson, 2014*). In relating to how a subject perceives its environment, Gibson explores the body’s interpretations of information as tantamount to distinguishing feeling and meaning as an affordance while avoiding the classification of the object (*Gibson, 2014*). Archive 0.333 considers the player as part of its procedure, so the player orients themselves to the constantly shifting options. With paths revealed after the first choice, what would a player do? Go backward to the other path? Go up? Go down? The environment says nothing to the player.

The player chooses up and finds the continuing dead trees throughout the land. They may find a few more items along the way, ranging from tapes to CDs, until they come to another Portable Home; inside, TAPES sits with a collection of audio objects throughout history. He greets the player kindly and with gratitude. The room is filled with shelves due to the enormous amount of forms that audio can take physically: tapes, CDs, records. The shelves are filled with blocks of physical objects: signs of things created in a different time and historical situation from the future of Archive 0.333. The sheer amount of material, countered to the shorter stature of TAPES, displays the ways that archiving piles up through a worldview presented by the game and the NPC interested in the audio objects—not to mention the player who collected them. This relates to the combined effects of embodiment and experience felt by the player that elicits “an alternate worldview and reflexive understanding of the self within it” (*Szabo, 2018*). While talking about virtual reality digital heritage projects, Szabo’s point is important to consider when thinking about the collection of artifacts. Audio can take the form of readings, interviews, music, ambience, harsh noise, and so much more. The player collects the forms of media and distributes them throughout the map.

Outside of TAPES’ home again, the player can head left or go back the way they came. If they go left, they will suddenly notice lively foliage in contrast to the dead foliage of the last areas. The next couple of areas has various objects, including a video object that TAPES will not accept. Soon, the player comes across a different-looking Portable Home with a trailer attached to it. Inside, they

will meet KINE for the first time. While TAPES knew NETWORK, KINE is bewildered to see new people. The player, and NETWORK, both do not remember anyone. Here, the dialogue will serve as a mechanic, which is “a kind of rule, an action that the game can allow or disallow; on the other, players must take up that act as their own for the game to proceed” (*Jagoda & McDonald, 2018*). The obtaining of items may prompt the player to act in the same way that the dialogue is telling a narrative and thinking about how the player contributes to archives despite them not having a distinct memory or reason to do so. The player and character intermingle and become one in implication.

KINE's space is not as cramped as TAPES, but one couldn't tell from the film reels and DVDs on the tables. Along with the audio objects that TAPES collect, these mediums are capturing time on flimsy material that can easily break. The fact that the player finds them in such great condition is an achievement, something that KINE hangs on when the player talks to him. In talking about the storage of time and space, Orit Halpern (2014) writes, “While photography and film would continually emerge as theoretically ideal mediums for storage in the imaginings of future technologies, their persistence and inadequacy belies this problematic—that of total and perfect recording, based on which to make the most accurate predictions, while simultaneously posing an older set of conventions involving storage and time” (*Halpern, 2015*). The records of these mediums are lackluster is “not perfect,” even if the piece needs to be archived in some way; perhaps it's due to misperceived inefficiencies in the medium. In relation, KINE is derived from the Kinescope, a machine that was developed in Britain to record television programs onto film reels for the preservation of the telecasts. NBC in New York used them as well, as shown in *Popular Mechanics Magazine* (1953). However, there was a decline in their use after the development of videotape recorders. Archival efforts should be put to use to archiving all formats of media, but there always has to be a specific focus. KINE, in this sense, acts as a memory of older media through his affinity for film reels.

After exiting KINE's home, there's a path down that the player hasn't explored? What about the initial two turns of the map? If the player were to have chosen right after exiting their home, the winding path would have brought them to the final archivist of Archive 0.333: RHETOR. They say to NETWORK, “Remember, I'm always behind you.” In a sense, this piece of dialogue does two things. First, it tells the player they came from the East and are exploring more places with more objects. It's clear that RHETOR cares for NETWORK and knows them. Second: RHETOR, an archivist of books and rhetoric archives the written word and written records of the spoken word. The deterministic value of language occupies public archives, like libraries, for people, and rhetoric is a form of that study through time. Written language is the original media of archives. Additionally, the library she occupies houses a plethora of books that range from sources discussed in this essay to portions of this essay. This is because “Documents are epistemic objects; they are the recognizable sites and subjects of interpretation across the disciplines and beyond, evidential structures in the long human history of clues” (*Gitelman, 2020*) They are determining in so far as the history that they contain and carry through time. The home of RHETOR is filled with books that contain the theory of this essay and the essay itself: the game carries its ideology within itself in a meta-textual way.

3 Collecting Artifacts

Finally, I want to discuss the final part of Archive 0.333 that truly engulfs a player into the environment of the game space: archiving objects. Let's return to the opening of the last section: the player chooses to go left outside of the Portable Home. In the space where the player chooses up or down, a CD sits near the cliffs. Audio would want that, so the player interacts with it to deliver it back to the archivist of that media. First, we have to map the "surfaces of [the object's] emergence," as Foucault writes (1972, 41). In finding and archiving forms of knowledge through various forms of writing and media, there has to be care to consider the placement of the objects therein. John Durham Peters (2015) considers the multiplicity of media as far ranging from the utilization of the suffix, "-graphy," when cataloging cinema, photos, writing, and sound. In Archive 0.333, each of these mediums is at stake for the archiving which heightens the sense of the intermedia network operating within the game space.

There are objects for each archivist: videotapes, audiotapes, CDs, DVDs, and books. Each one is tailored for specific forms of the archive that they maintain as NETWORK brings them closer together through the ANP2P. Here, the game asks the questions of archival materials that Szabo (2018) explores: "What role does access to archival resources play in understanding a specific location or object in situ? How can we engage users in meaning-making within the hybrid reality system we create?" (p. 372). A hybrid archive run through a P2P system allows for the dispersion of materials in a way that can open the access of digital archives. It begs to be explored by the player. When the player picks up a disc, tape, or book, a dialogue appears informing the player of its contents: for instance, books contain quotes included within this essay. The initial gratification of obtaining the item overwhelms the player.

However, with the affordances of GBStudio and the pulled back scale of Archive 0.333 remains a distinguishing proposal for further development. The archive and inventory remain inaccessible to the player in this iteration of Archive—closed off like the platform the game references in its pared-down color scheme to match the aesthetics of the original GameBoy platforms. In this configuration, a player would be forced to reconcile with the questions of archiving that the project proposes: an open system of accessible files. They want access to the sounds, reels, and pages of the objects. NETWORK is only an expert in delivering and maintaining the network, but the player may have interests beyond that. In NETWORK's home, there is a reference to an audio player that has been left useless; NB states that they cannot follow the player to keep maintenance of the portable home; the media objects can only be accessed by picking them up or engaging with the environments of the homes throughout the game. These limitations communicate between a player and a game the tensions of the screen and archives (*Halpern, 2015*). The affordance carried with GBStudio, then, focuses on the narrative and speculative fiction it creates to provoke thoughts of archiving. The data behind the screen, the hints of a larger network at play, and the objects living inside remains just barely hidden behind the layers of references and archives the game possesses.

4 Conclusion

Archive 0.333 is a metagame that acts as a scholarly invocation of the digital archive. In an attempt to open a closed system, the game embraces the use of an independent game engine to elicit a narrative founded upon the principles of archiving materials. The player, embodying NETWORK, experiences a story that converges between intellectual thought and critical making. It embraces the ideals of speculative fiction: “By thinking of building interactive stories instead of building games, we also free ourselves from some of the constraints that go along with game design, such as the expectation of either a conflict for the user to resolve or a competition with a winning or losing outcome” (Salter, 2018). The game doesn’t technically have a game over screen. Even after finding the archivists and objects, the player must live in a world that then becomes just as inaccessible as the GameBoy it seeks to open. The story, then, becomes a tale about how closed systems afford less access to the histories of humanity forged in and by media and technology.

Finally, Archive 0.333’s successes and failures serve as a prototype to build upon through the use of other game engines in its future to bolster the accessibility to digital archives. Perhaps through this mode of interaction, the player would be able to have NB come along with them, choose music to listen to that TAPES has, play an audiobook voiced by RHETOR, or watch clips that KINE can locate. Perhaps in the next city, the group will find another archivist that looks for interactive materials, such as 0.333. In this, “we find that ecology is art in the most fundamental and pragmatic sense, expanding our apprehension of reality” (Rossoni & Blankenship, 2013). A game about archives can ponder on the different techniques and utilities of the various media; it can ask a participant to add their own materials; or, it can provoke archivists to respond in agreement or abhorrence of the indication that archives should embrace digital clouds and P2P networks. Archive 0.333 provokes responses and thought, just as the archives and histories of technologies force us to question the social aspects of materials that people encounter.

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