Save Yourself! A Manifesto for Preserving Researchers' Play

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Abstract

There is growing research into recording subjective play experiences as a form of archival preservation. In tandem, the HCI and games community is increasingly exploring the importance of reflexive, qualitative methodologies for metaresearch. I argue that we should record researchers' play experiences as a form of embodied metaresearch that will result in more rigorous and open science, while also providing rich resources for future video game archaeologists, historians and archivists.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models**; • **Applied computing → Computer games**.

Keywords

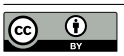
video game preservation, play preservation, metaresearch, archaeogaming

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1 Introduction

Beyond sustained access to playable hardware and software, it is important to preserve video game play experiences, especially in terms of capturing a particular historical and cultural context. There are various methods for approaching this, whether through paratexts [29] or ethnographic [24] methods. However, there has been limited focus on the play experience of video game researchers themselves. To give one example, in a previous Perspectives on Play paper [8], Foffano contextualised her research on designing emotional accessibility through her own gaming experiences. I will argue here that reporting on and preserving our personal experiences of academic play has both archival and metaresearch contributions for games scholarship.

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2 Play Preservation

Discourse around games preservation often focuses on hardware and software preservation, however there is also the matter of "experiential preservation" [15] the preservation of play experiences that are historically, socially and culturally constituted. Such experiences are by their very nature ephemeral and personal, which makes them challenging to capture but all the more valuable for the context they can provide to future researchers. As Newman and Simons [18] have argued:

> "Some stakeholders will be interested in how games were played, the meanings made of them by players, and the social interactions that support and sustain gameplay."

Indeed, it is imperative that we preserve diverse play experiences to avoid flattening our accounts to "the mythical and monolithic identity of the 'gamer'" [27]. Preserving play experiences allows us to lean into the specificity of subjective experiences, a point that will be elaborated on in the section below.

There are multiple existing methods that have been employed by archivists, fans and academics[1] to preserve play experiences. This includes videography, both in terms of analysing existing user-generated content such as YouTube videos of gameplay [19], or recording new "traversals" in which the original developer narrates themself playing their own game [17]. Photography, whether in-game screenshots or photographs of players themselves [9] can also provide extra context. Other paratexts of play, such as gaming magazines [16], maps [20], or life writing [10] can also add to the bricolage of sources. While ethnographic methods are not necessarily primarily used for archival purposes, Jennings [13] has argued that autoethnographies in particular provide records of embodied experiences, including of researchers, such as "the terror that came with doing public feminist work before, during, and after GamerGate."

I have argued for the application of archaeological theory and methods to video games as a form of play preservation. An example of this is an archaeological survey of player-created content I led in *Elden Ring*, in which traces of player activity were recorded spatially [23]. In tandem with this, my collaborator and I conducted a retrospective collaborative autoethnography, watching back video recordings we had taken of the archaeological fieldwork and reflecting on our own knowledge production process. This was valuable as a form of HCI metaresearch, which I will argue should be embraced by the CHI Play community.

3 Reflexivity and metaresearch

Much has been written on the importance of reflexivity and including the researchers' subjective lived experience in HCI research,

[1]These groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

whether that be in terms of feminist HCI methodologies that critique disembodied rationalism [2], Queer HCI and calls for more thoughtful engagement with positionality [22] or calls for an anarchist HCI that "synthesises theories, methods and fields of study that focus on the dignity, not efficiency, of humanity" [14]. In terms of existing methodologies, a retrospective triethnography on the failures that Howell, Desjardins and Fox [12] encountered in their research designs is a great example of such reflexive research, especially in terms of a metaresearch contribution. Metaresearch, the use of scientific methodologies to study how science is conducted, is increasingly an area of interest for the wider HCI community [21]. To date there has been some metaresearch studies on the CHI Play community itself, such as a systematic literature review of transparency in measurement reporting [1], however such work does not focus on the inclusion of researchers' subjective experiences. Of particular relevance to this manifesto is Gerling and Birk's call [11] for more rigorous and consistent community standards for reporting on artifacts in experimental games research, especially: "the context of play that is required in research reporting to help readers put things in perspective." I argue that making the paratexts of researcher play publicly available, such as screenshots, videos and notes, along with descriptive metadata on the material contexts in which this play happened, not only provides an archive of play for future researchers to study, but it also results in more rigorous, open science.

4 The Manifesto for Preserving Researchers' Play

The Manifesto includes the following provocations:

(1) **Resist the 'ivory playground'**
Play is a form of research [7], whether this be in a more obvious form such as conducting ethnographic research in a game, or playing a title in order to source screenshots to include in a research paper. The strange metagames [3] that we engage in when studying this medium is itself a form of play which is worth studying because it reflects the practices and norms of our research communities. I would also argue that there is far more overlap between the metagames of academic researchers and players who engage in their own forms of 'informal' research and documentation [6, 28] than we might initially assume. Thus, to treat the play we as researchers conduct as somehow irrelevant to the understanding of wider play practises is actually maintaining the idea of an 'ivory playground;' let's dismantle that.

(2) **Indulge mundane entanglements**
Including records of our own play experiences as researchers is to embrace the importance of the vernacular, the mundane, the everyday. This is about including accounts of failure, of adhoc technological assemblages,[2] of vulnerability. If we recognise that we need to move beyond focusing on "extraordinary" experiences of play to the quotidian [26], then this should also include researcher play. This means asking more from our reporting than recounting hours of play or in-game achievements, as "it is not simply a matter of time but orientation" [25]. Furthermore, centring researchers' mundane play also allows us to critically engage with our own "romanticism" of games [4], the instrumentalisation of nostalgia [5] and the idealisation of the past (whether of video game history or our own play experiences). This Manifesto calls for looking beyond "instrumental play" and academic power gaming as a form of performing expertise, to instead thoughtfully sharing academic paratexts of play, even and especially as they capture the mundane rituals of research.

(3) **Become an autoarchaeologist**
On a more practical level, this Manifesto calls for researchers to upload the paratexts they produce as part of their research process to an open access repository, such as OSF, [3] along with descriptive metadata on how, why and in what conditions these paratexts were produced. At what time did you conduct this academic play? Where? How did this affect your knowledge production process? What did you struggle with in the game? Do you have a personal connection to this game? Did your relationship to the game change over the course of studying it? These are questions we may ask our participants, so why not ourselves?

5 Conclusion

Just as analogue archaeologists use a variety of methods including photography, plans and field diaries, we can creatively engage in recording our own forms of playful research through various paratexts. In a hundred years time, what will games research look like? While we can only speculate on this question, I would theorise that both future games archaeologists and designers would benefit from a richer record of how we conducted our research in the present moment.

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[2] For example, me balancing a microphone on my bed while I connect my Steam Deck to my laptop for a video recording because it was the only place I could work at the time.

[3] https://osf.io/

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