Preserving Games, Constructing "Games"

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Research Question

To better understand efforts at preserving video and computer games, can we formalize bundles of significant properties into different archival paradigms? Do these archival paradigms correspond to ideological approaches to the game object?

Paradigm 1: Cultural Heritage

This ideological approach to games is exemplified by the Preserving Virtual Worlds project (McDonough et al. 2010) - as it says on the tin, this initiative explored how to preserve not just games, but the worlds created by games. This paradigm accepts that games, as manifestations of culture, are linked in a contextual web with their players, their creators, other games, etc. In order to deal with games-as-culture, a variety of preservation approaches must be taken. The most pressing need is the need to explain, via context, the game and its relationship to culture.

Significant Properties:

- Context: e.g., familiar myths, information about the creator(s)
- Players, playerbase

Canonical Preservation Strategy:

- Multimodal, incorporates many different approaches
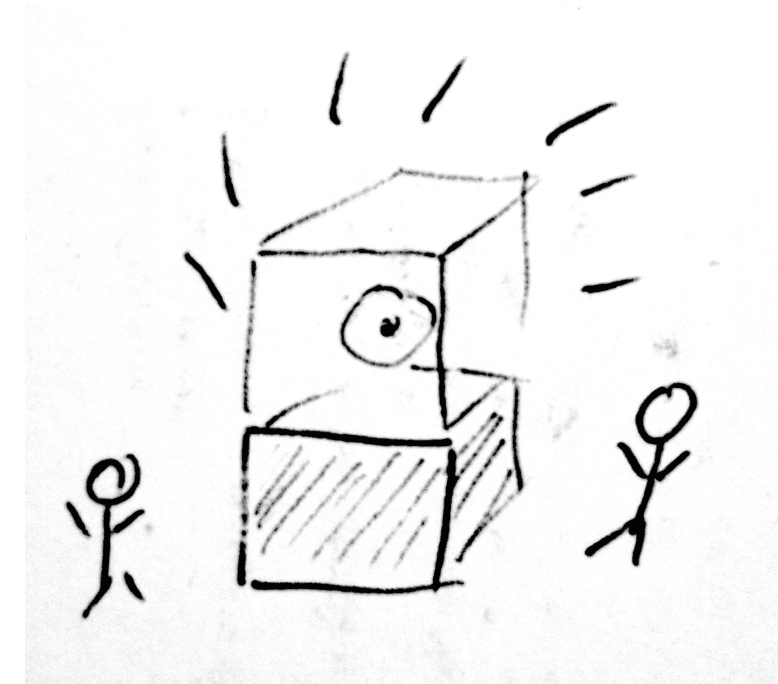
Paradigm 2: Software Object

This ideological approach most closely parallels leading thought in digital archiving (see Barwick et al. 2011). The game is seen first and foremost as a special kind of software object. In this paradigm, games are treated and processed like other software creations. The most pressing need is the need to maintain a playable digital copy of the game.

Significant Properties:

- Set of game rules, enacted in code
- Static assets

Canonical Preservation Strategy:

- Emulation

Future Work

First, little work has been done to explore the internal archives of video game corporations. I intend to pursue the aforementioned topic through a series of interviews, site visits, and other relevant means.

Second, I intend to survey current game researchers to understand how archival materials can best support their study of games.

Acknowledgments

Methods

I conducted a guided literature review, exploring original research and projects related to video and computer game preservation. The literature was not limited to the US, incorporating material from other English-speaking archival contexts such as New Zealand and Australia.

## Paradigm 3: Fan Nostalgia

This paradigm is less prominent in the archival world, although many fan-driven efforts to preserve games exist such as the Goodwill Computer Museum in Austin, TX or the Retro Arcade Museum in Rochester, NY. Some in the archival world (Galloway 2011) suggest partnering with fan efforts in order to combine the domain expertise of fans with the organizational and preservational expertise of archivists. The most pressing need in this paradigm is the need to share one's enthusiasm about a game.

Significant Properties:

- Excitement, memory
- Platform, hardware, feelies

Canonical Preservation Strategy:

- Collection and storage
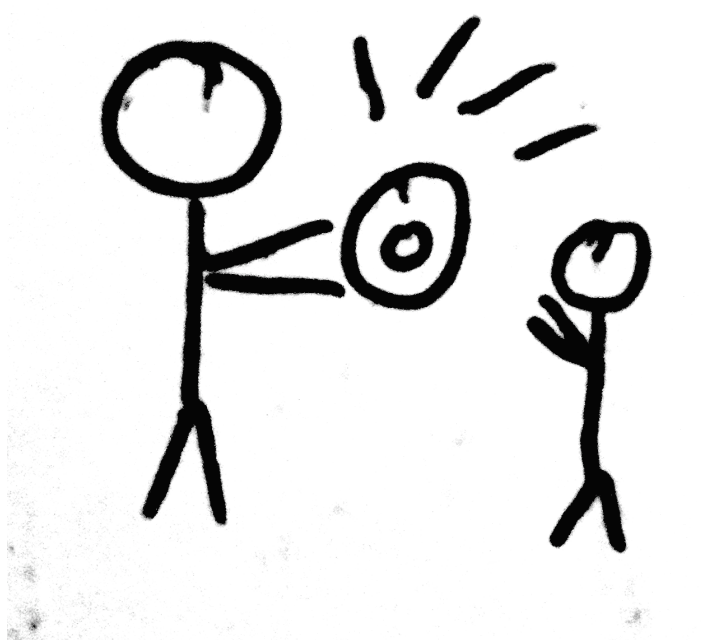
Paradigm 4: Consumer Product

This paradigm is actually counterproductive to public archival efforts. (Guttenbrunner et al. 2010) Under this paradigm, the game exists first and foremost as a consumer product, with full legal protection. Intellectual property rights are leveraged against any that would share the game through unsanctioned means. Under this paradigm, emulation is akin to piracy (Conley et al. 2004). The most pressing need is the need to protect the franchise.

Significant Properties:

- Intellectual Property
- Potential profit

Canonical Preservation Strategy:

- Strict corporate control
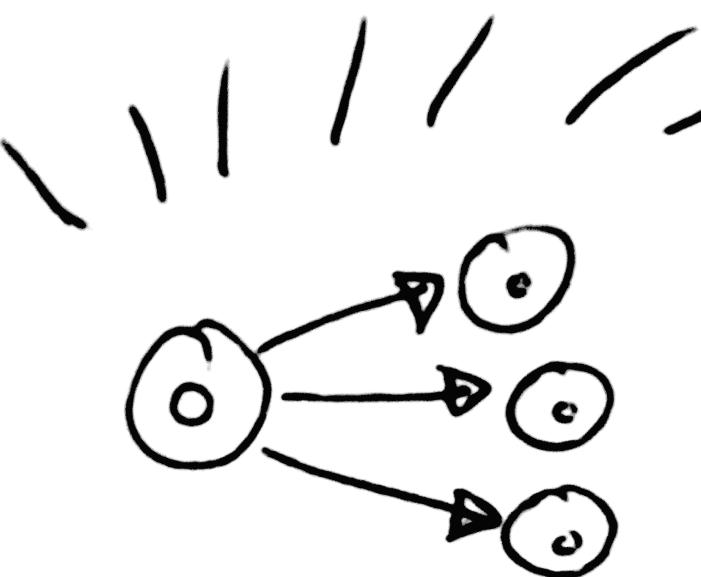
Conclusions

Through the framework of significant properties and preservation strategies, I was able to categorize each of the preservation projects in this literature review into these four paradigms. This framework can be used by archivists to assist researchers, based on their self-identified interests.

References

For a full list of references, please consult http://bit.ly/1B6Tkma