

Archival adventuring

Melissa Kagen

Bangor University, UK

Convergence: The International
Journal of Research into
New Media Technologies
1–14

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1354856519847875

journals.sagepub.com/home/con



Abstract

This article describes the ‘archival adventure’ mechanic, in which players assemble a story by piecing it together from the archival memorabilia left behind. I compare the use of this mechanic in immersive performances and videogames, analyzing Meow Wolf’s *House of Eternal Return* (2016–present) and Giant Sparrow’s *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) to argue that an archival adventure’s sense of liveness is created by a player, who arrives not to complete an extant story but to confound it with the confusing messiness of life. I lay out the conundrum of the archival – a concept associated with both death and life, certainty and uncertainty, written record and ephemeral performance – and discuss how the archival adventure confounds and plays with these oppositions. Finally, I examine its gender dynamics to show how these works can fulfill the promise of queer and feminist archival poetics.

Keywords

Archive, immersion, liveness, queer, videogame

In Meow Wolf’s *House of Eternal Return* (2016–present), a site-specific art installation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, visitors walk into a renovated bowling alley without any idea of what to expect. Upon entering the large indoor space, they see a Victorian-style house that would seem rather normal if it were located on a suburban street. An open mailbox beside the entrance contains a letter. This house, the letter reads, belonged to the Selig family, but it has now been placed in some sort of spatiotemporal bubble by a mysterious organization called The Charter. Visitors are instructed to explore and determine why it has been frozen here. Inside the house, participants quickly discover that the family’s home contains portals to wildly unearthly environments, portals created by dangerous experiments with time, space, and death. These openings occur in the most pedestrian of places – a pathway through the refrigerator, a multiverse through the fireplace, a slide inside a washing machine. Understanding what happened here requires the participant to wander back and forth between the more realistic world of the house and the fantastical, sci-fi

Corresponding author:

Melissa Kagen, Bangor University, College of Arts, Humanities and Business, John Phillips Hall, College Road, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG, UK.

Emails: m.kagen@bangor.ac.uk; melkagen@gmail.com

environments through the portals, reading clues and tying together parts of the story through the ephemera left behind.

In the video game *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), the player character and protagonist, Edith, is a 17-year-old girl and the last person alive in the cursed Finch family. She's spent the last decade avoiding her past and running away from her family's ancestral home, which is empty of living relatives but filled with the textual ephemera of Edith's many dead family members. As the player explores the house and finds ways into its locked bedrooms, they come upon shrines to each family member who lived and died there. By interacting with the written object on the shrine (a comic book, a poem, a letter, a diary entry), the player triggers a flashback. The game's controls then shift and map onto whatever is happening in that scene, enabling the player to play through a fanciful version of that relative's death scene. Again, players must assemble a past story by combing through a family home and closely examining the papers, picture albums, and other objects the absent family members left behind.

Because of the importance of archival thinking in the conception of works like these, I'd like to use this article to consider them as 'archival adventures': games composed of ludic repositories of material, carefully arranged, which the player turns into a narrative adventure by the way in which they choose to navigate the given space. When we conceive of these game worlds as archives, players become researchers and game worlds come into focus as highly organized spaces; the objects and texts one finds within them, no matter how random they seem, can be recognized as careful arrangements. I will situate the archival adventure within the multiple (and often overlapping) scholarly discourses that lay claim to it: game studies, performance studies, narratology, spatial theory, and archive theory. In particular, I want to examine how two different genres of archival adventure – immersive performances and video games – handle the challenges of this mechanic in ways that are specific to their differing constraints. Analyzing *House of Eternal Return* (hereafter *HoER*) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (hereafter *WRoEF*), I argue that an archival adventure's sense of liveness is created by the player, who arrives not to complete a story but to confound it with the confusing messiness of life.

When I call archival adventuring a game mechanic, I begin with Järvinen's definition of the term. A mechanic is a 'means to guide the player into particular behavior by constraining the space of possible plans to attain goals' (2008: 254). Sicart writes that this understanding of mechanic is too goal-oriented and offers the broader definition: a mechanic is 'the action invoked by an agent to interact with the game world, as constrained by the game rules' (2008). At the most fundamental level, the mechanics of an archival adventure are, then, the basic actions a player takes to interact with the world: unearthing text, skimming or reading text, writing and sketching notes, taking pictures, theorizing aloud, and so on. As these are also the actions of a researcher in an archive, I combine them into one compound game mechanic: archival adventuring.

In the first section, I examine the way that archival adventures create meaning by charging objects with potential narrative, showing how this mechanic taps into theoretical discourses in experimental theater and video games. I argue that archival adventures – no matter the medium – are unified by the practice of enlivening the archive. These are works that offer the player a network of dead, past-oriented recordings of some previous performance; the player then makes what is dead come alive through playing it. Next, I lay out the conundrum of the archival – a concept associated with both death and life, certainty and uncertainty, written record and ephemeral performance – and discuss how the archival adventure confounds and plays with these

oppositions. Finally, I examine the gender dynamics of the archival adventure and show how these works can fulfill the promise of queer and feminist archival poetics. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* and Rebecca Schneider's understanding of the feminist archive in 'Performance Remains', I argue that the player's exploration in these games can be seen as a queer and/or feminized re-enfleshment of inert, quotidian, normative space. I then show how, in these two works, the radical potential of the archive is fulfilled *ludologically*, even while the narratives in these works serve to straighten the characters and bound their possibilities.

What comes alive

Archival adventures take place in spaces without characters, but they feel charged with liveness – what Henry Jenkins (2004: 127) describes as a 'narratively-impregnated mise-en-scene'. One might think that the major distinction between a performance piece and a video game would be this question of liveness; one is a piece of site-specific performance art that the viewer experiences once, and one is a mass-produced recording, accessible on any computer with a Steam account. In Benjaminian terms, the piece of performance art would seem to have an aura of un-reproducibility, while the video game would seem to be a mass-reproducible. But as Philip Auslander (2008) has argued, there is no longer an ontological difference between live performance (like performance art) and mediated performance (recorded works, like film or video games). This, Auslander (2008: 36) explains, is because those live forms have been so thoroughly immersed in the language and context of mediatized culture that they cannot be conceived or perceived from outside it. In other words, the participant who enters *HoER* does so through the frame of having already played video games, or at the very least being culturally aware of video games. They attend the live event having already seen and understood the conventions of the mediated one. Part of the allure of *HoER* is precisely that it functions like a video game come-to-life (although its marketing emphasizes its qualities as a live art installation rather than its ties to mass cultural forms like video games). By looking at its story, we can see that its fantastical sci-fi elements and environments gesture toward similarly surreal, sci-fi video game worlds. *WRoEF*, with its adept employment of technology, is able to tell a more intimate story about the lives and deaths of individual people partly because its status as a video game is unquestionable. If *HoER* contained no portals to other realms, it could risk being seen as an inaccessible piece of performance art, or worse, an old house with nothing to offer. Instead, it becomes legible as a 'live' video game. In sum, it is no longer possible to identify one as live and the other as recorded – and as we will see, both works contain elements that can only be experienced 'live'.

Instead, the sense of liveness in *HoER* comes from the hyperreality of the space. Real and fictional worlds overlap so completely that real objects take on an air of unreality and fictional objects take on an air of reality, a concept inherited from mid-20th-century experimental performance. By erasing the spatial distinction between performers and audience, performers could heighten theater's 'live' quality and increase its immersivity. In the 1930s, Antonin Artaud (1989: 104) was already announcing his intention 'to do away with stage and auditorium, replacing them by a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind'. Richard Schechner's (1968: 48) '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre' called for 'no further bifurcation of space, in which one territory is meted out to the audience and the other to the performers'. Early performance artists like Alan Kaprow (1956: 1, emphasis in original) staged 'Happenings', putting into practice the precept that '*the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps*

indistinct, as possible'. Augusto Boal's (1979) 'invisible theatre' featured politically motivated performances in everyday locations, in which unsuspecting observers were transformed into what Boal called 'spect-actors'. The near-total overlap between real life and theatrical fiction became a cornerstone of immersive performance, as it is now of augmented reality and mobile games.

We can easily see this phenomenon at work in *HoER*. The Selig family home contains myriad books, computers, furniture, and other objects that *inhabit* this fictive space but were originally designed and manufactured for other, real-world purposes. Although video games often contain lore and objects charged with narrative, that material is usually created specifically for that game; it's unusual for a game to include lore that the game's creative team didn't write. But in *HoER*, the presence of published, real-world books alongside fictional, Selig-specific text put the participant on constant high alert. All of these objects acquire a new potential meaning, and it takes time to contemplate a bookshelf with sensitivity and examine each book for narrative spurs. The hyperreal overlap between fictive and real encourages the participant to page through ostensibly 'useless' material in an effort to find that which might be 'useful' – in other words, that which might reveal a story line. This alters the player's sense of what kind of play might, then, be useful after all. Physical archival adventures thus encourage participants into a contemplative play style that rewards slowness, purposelessness, and careful consideration of those objects which, on their surface, appear unimportant.

As Marie-Laure Ryan (2015: 226) points out, 'when performing becomes synonymous with living, the theatrical experience inherits the immersive and interactive qualities that define our experience of being-in-the-world'. A participant enters a space that may look nearly identical to everyday life, but they feel a charge nonetheless, because they are aware that they are simultaneously entering into (and participating in) a fictive world in which anything could happen. As Josephine Machon (2013: 143, emphasis in original) articulates,

[i]n immersive theatres, space, combined with carefully executed activity, opens up a *felt*, live(d) poetic in both an epic and intimate manner so that the individual inhabits that world with intensity. Within such reawakened space the actions performed, even where small, subtle and intimate, take on epic proportions due to an ongoing imaginative and physical exchange across and between the participants in the act; the space; the duration; and the event as a whole.

This sense of a theatrical space as 'awakened' or 'alive' also recalls the spatial poetics of Gaston Bachelard (1969: 47), who writes that 'a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space'. Other theorists of space and place – Yi Fu Tuan, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Doreen Massey – have made related arguments about how spaces (and what may have occurred there) can create a sense of narrative. Massey (2010: 9) argues that space is 'always under construction . . . a product of relations-between . . . a simultaneity of stories-so-far'. Lived-in spaces are, in that sense, heterotopias – overdetermined locations which layer association on top of association, like a geographic palimpsest.

Video game and electronic literature theorists are similarly interested in how fictive space tells a story, but the hyperreal overlap with real life is less important – with the exception of mobile and Augmented Reality games, in which 'location is not compelling (until it is haunted)' (Sample, 2014: 68). Instead, digital/video game theorists of this mechanic are primarily interested in a participant's agency and interactivity. Ryan (2001: n.p.) categorizes works with the archival adventure mechanic as having internal-exploratory interactivity: 'the user exercises her agency by moving around the fictional world, picking up objects and looking at them, viewing the action from

different points of view, investigating a case, and trying to reconstitute events that have taken place a long time ago'. Jenkins (2004: 129) similarly defines the mechanic as 'embedded' spatial storytelling, in which 'the game space becomes a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot'. In his foundational analysis of interactive fiction, Nick Montfort (2003: viii, emphasis in original) describes the setting of a work of IF as 'more than a setting. It is a simulated *world*' which literally comes into being as the player inputs commands and enacts the narrative potential of the objects they encounter. Clara Fernández-Vara's (2011) term 'indexical storytelling' highlights how each separate object or entity in the game only crystalizes into narrative due to the actions of the player. The space does not create the narrative – rather, the narrative materializes when player/participants move through it and construct it themselves by interacting with it.

By framing the player as the configurative agent of the story, these games recall the flaneur: the aimless urban walker who articulates an urban landscape by the way in which he chooses to traverse it (De Certeau, 1984). By enunciating an individual path and counterwalking the established narrative of a city, the flaneur becomes a configurative agent. If we imagine the city as a procedurally generated text, the flaneur is the one who delineates the story line. In *Unit Operations*, Bogost (2006: 75) notes the similarities between the flaneur and the player of a spatial story, both of whom are configurative agents who transform their world by their movement through it and participation within it. And it's hardly accidental that, in contemporary game studies, works with archival adventure mechanics are often identified as 'walking simulators' – games which rely primarily on the player moving through a space, tying the story together through their movement, and becoming a configurative agent/subversive counterwalker (Kagen, 2017). The archival adventurer, like the flaneur, moves through space and becomes an agent of narrative creation through the choices they make in their wandering.

Michael Kirby's (1984) idea of 'nonmatrixed representation' in experimental performance and film is helpful here as well. He describes how a performer can carry out acts that do not make narrative sense until the work of art puts them all into context. An actor might grimace into a camera, but that grimace does not acquire narrative meaning until a cinematographer cuts it into, for example, a funeral sequence. Similarly, the designer of an archival adventure might create a receipt for a fancy dinner for two, but its narrative meaning remains vague until the player also finds a calendar that makes it clear that the husband was out of town that weekend (thus implying that his wife is having an affair). The story exists only as nonmatrixed representation until the walker/player exerts their agency over the world. The order in which the archival adventurer engages with the designed world transforms the latent, nonrepresentational object into something that matters within the context of the story. The player thus brings a space to life by moving through it, determining for themselves what does and does not have meaning.

This is also essentially what scholars do in an archive – intellectually move through a field of information and determine what should and should not be included within a narrative. In the next section, I will outline the contradictions of the archive and show how these are reflected in the design of archival adventures.

What remains

From Foucault and Derrida through Phelan and Cvetkovich, we can trace a lineage of thinkers who conceive of the archive as both a source of permanence and authority and, paradoxically, as a collection of somewhat arbitrary fragments, a set of texts that are riddled with lacunae (Manoff,

2004). Michel Foucault (1972: 129) thinks of the archive as ‘the system of discursivity’ that shapes the whole network of possible understandings. The archive creates a system, a discourse, within which a story can exist. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida (1995) describes the formulation of the archive as a conflict between the death drive (i.e. erasure, forgetting, destruction) and the pleasure principle (conservation, remembering, creating). For Carolyn Steedman (2001: 1117), this romantic notion fails to get at the fact that the archive is constructed *primarily* of gaps, so much so that ‘historians read for what is not there: the silences and the absences of the documents always speak to us’. This contradictory understanding of the archive – at once a mess of disorganized material, which could be arranged in any number of ways, and simultaneously a powerful force of epistemological certainty, promising a final answer to anyone curious enough to explore it – creates a very interesting challenge for game designers. The brilliant fun of the archival adventure largely comes from the way that its designers shape the material, arrange for players to find the narrative arc, and deliver a sense of closure and teleology. This mirrors the way that historians behave in an actual archive – which is to say, it rehearses and reinforces the idea of history as something that does have one, true narrative that we *can* know.

The gaps in the archive, where the historian has the space to knit the story together, are also where the story happens in an archival adventure. We have discussed how players moving through a game, like researchers working their way through an archive or flaneurs wandering through a city, become configurative agents. If ‘database and narrative are natural enemies’ (Manovich, 2001: 225), then players are the narrative force that unites them by connecting one archival scrap to another. But because game designers *do* originally create an archival adventure, the player’s narrative configuring isn’t unreasonable at all. The designers, like the kindly gods they are, have seeded the game with precisely the narrative that the player can’t help but construct. An archival adventure isn’t a database, after all, nor a pure archive; it’s an intentional work of art, and its gaps are there for a reason. In *WRoEF*, for example, Edith’s notebook contains a blank family tree, containing only the names of her deceased relatives. After interacting with a relative’s archival object and playing through their death scene, the player’s view automatically returns to the notebook, where Edith sketches the face of the dead relative. As it gradually fills with faces, the notebook serves as a record of which relatives’ shrines still remain to be discovered. The gaps in her record are there to be filled – they don’t exist to no purpose.

Edith’s notebook also reminds us of the crucial connection between writing and the archive. So far in this section, I have taken for granted the idea that an archive is composed of *written* material. Derrida’s archive fever is the fever to conserve written text, and the gaps Steedman identifies are gaps in the written record. This had been the traditional conception of an archive, in conventional understanding and in library science; if speech is aligned with presence and liveness, then the archive is aligned with that which can be written down. In performance studies, for example, the archive was originally constituted solely of that which could be retained after a performance was over. In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan (1993: 146) writes,

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. Performance . . . becomes itself through disappearance.

By Phelan’s reckoning, performance is that which refuses to remain. By extension, any component of a performance that *could* be kept in an archive – a playbill, a photograph, a set design, a

costume piece, a review, or a recording – constitutes something leftover, a shadowy vestige of the performance rather than the performance itself.

The written text in *WROEF* illustrates this idea with several layers of complexity. First, book icons represent the enshrined objects which contain the Finches playable memories, and each object is, itself, a text of some kind. That which is left behind is a written object. Second, each memory functions as a unique performance rather than a (re-playable) mini-game; players can only access each memory once, and afterward, Edith sketches the face of the dead relative in her notebook as a way of recording (or, we could say, archiving) that ephemeral experience. Third, as Edith narrates her thoughts aloud throughout the game, the player hears her voice and simultaneously sees her words manifest as text. This text, we learn, is what she is writing in the journal she leaves to her son. In the moment, the words are superimposed onto whatever surface is in front of her – not like subtitles, but as though the text were written onto whatever object she is facing. If the text appears in the air, the player can walk through it and dissolve it. A few moments after it's spoken, the writing disappears, never to be recovered. It's not treated like something that can be saved, stored, reread, or archived in a logbook, like the textual clues in many games – it's a performance that you can only experience once during each playthrough. In other words, the archival adventure plays with the distinction between archivable (written) object and ephemeral performance. The written voiceover text doesn't last in a sustainable way; the archived object is imbued with an entire game world of playable memory, but only once. The family home serves simultaneously a stable, solid archive of objects that can be explored at leisure, and also a set of texts that exist constantly at the vanishing point of ephemeral performance.

In 'Performance Remains', Rebecca Schneider (2001: 102) points out the phallogocentric roots of our deference to a housed, written archive, noting that the Greek root of the word archive (archon) refers to the patriarch's *house*. As she argues, '[t]he archive is built on "house arrest" – the solidification of value in ontology as retroactively secured in document, object, record' (Schneider, 2001: 104). If performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan, 1993: 146), if it lives at the vanishing point, then the archive becomes a nice, solid, comforting repository of objects that we can hang onto. Schneider maps this to gender, suggesting that the relationship between a traditional, solid, lasting archive and an ephemeral, slippery, vanishing performance traces out a masculine/feminine binary. And if so, then it becomes interesting to ask why we define performance as disappearing at all – basically, whether we use the masculine, archivable, written object as the baseline and then define performance as everything else, everything *other*. As Schneider (2001: 100) puts it, 'here in the archive, bones are given to speak the disappearance of flesh, and to script that flesh as disappearing'.

In the prologue of *WROEF*, Edith explains that she left her family's multigenerational home as a child, but is returning because 'now I had questions about my family that only my house knew the answers to'. Immediately, Edith frames the house as an authoritative, stable object that can stand in for the disappeared family. Whatever experiences might have taken place in this house have evaporated, leaving only the eponymous remains. This game actually includes *two* patriarchal houses: in addition to the home where Edith lived as a child, we can see the original family home that great-grandfather Sven brought over from Sweden and crashed just offshore in a storm. That literally patriarchal house lurks in the background of the game, and Edith can look at it through a telescope.

To avoid privileging the written object over the ephemeral performance, Schneider suggests thinking of embodied memory as its own kind of archive, with the body which performs something functioning as a meat archive. For Schneider (2001: 103), 'remains do not have to be isolated to the

document . . . [the body] becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory'. Oral histories, physical memory, the transmission of performance practices, traditions – these, too, belong to the archive of a performance, as much as a physical object a researcher could look up in the basement of a library or find in the closet of a house.

It is this conception of the archive that exists (and is technologically underlined) in *WRoEF*. The player inhabits Edith's body, but also gets the chance to inhabit the bodies of the other family members. In most of the game (when playing on a PC), the player uses the keys WASD to walk forward, backward, right, and left; the trackpad to look around; and the mouse to interact with objects. But within each memory, the controls are remapped, and players might suddenly use WASD and the mouse to zoom a camera, fly a kite, control the internal movements of wild animals, interact with the pages of a comic book, swing fatally off a cliff – a different mechanic for each person's death scene. The deceased relative's archival object does not simply record their memory in writing, but enables its revivification in performance. And by remapping the controls to different game mechanics, the mini-game within each memory actively draws the player's attention to each, unique revitalization.

Further, as the game's title suggests, it is ultimately a work about Edith and what remains of her – a question which is most explicitly answered by Edith's pregnancy and subsequent death. About halfway through the game, we learn that Edith is 22 weeks pregnant, an event that precipitated her return home. In the final scene, players are surrounded by free-floating alphabetic letters which become blood cells. The player finds themselves inside her birth canal (in a cutscene), as Edith's voiceover marvels at the wonder of being alive. Finally, the player sees her teenage son standing beside her grave, holding flowers and the notebook with her completed family tree. To read this through Schneider and Phelan, the archived story lives on, even as the flesh disappears; the archive gives birth to a performance both metaphorically (in the re-playability of the memories) and literally (in the birth of her child).

Moreover, Edith (it is implied) died during childbirth, highlighting the other meaning of *remains*: the corporeal material of a dead person. The theme of death ties the entire game together – the family suffers under a fatal curse, each dead relative has a shrine which tells the story of their death, most shrines are located behind the character's sealed bedroom door (on which are written the gravestone-like names and dates of that character), and the player character is completely (and correctly, as it happens) preoccupied with her oncoming death. The game has complex mechropolitics, Amanda Phillips' term for how a game allows or disallows a player to die (Phillips, 2015). On one hand, you can't die throughout the game – not only is there no permadeath, there's not even a possibility of death for the player character until the end of the game (at which point it cannot be avoided). On the other hand, you play the death scene or near-death scene of every member of Edith's family, which centers death as a narrative and ludological theme. Edith connects the concept of death very explicitly to writing, worrying that 'the stories themselves might be the problem'. At one point, she says, 'I don't know if I should even be writing this. Maybe it'd be better if all this just died with me', before voicing her fear that 'maybe we believed so much in a family curse, we made it real'. The player confirms this fear, bring each family member briefly back to life, only to kill them again in the playthrough of their death scene. And by enlivening the (dead, written, housed) family archive, the player enacts the Schneiderian concept of a feminine archive: archive as embodied practice, as repeated performance passed down through generations.

What straightens

To rehearse the argument so far: the archival adventure invites the player to enliven textual objects, but that enlivening can occur through different means. In *HoER*, the enlivening arises from the near-total overlap of real and fictional archival objects. Alternately, in *WRoEF*, the enshrined archival objects are imbued with playable memories, which the player performs by interacting with the object. In both cases, the archival adventure relies on a stable, heteronormative space – a redoubtable ancestral home filled with memorabilia from several generations of presumed-to-be straight children – which is revived in some way by the arrival of the player. This final section considers the archival adventure as queer and examines how it draws its meaning from the possibility of queering an archive. I argue that the archival adventure is a form with the *potential* (but not the certainty) of fulfilling the promise of queer archival poetics, and I show how the two works considered in this article are *ludologically* queer but *narratively* straight.

Multiple scholars have identified the innately queer and radical potential of an archive. Regina Kunzel (Arondekar et al., 2015: 214) finds queerness in the disorganized nature of archives, ‘in their unruliness masked by orderliness, their excess and eccentricities, their sometimes erotic charge, the way they spark and frustrate our desires’. Juana Maria Rodriguez writes (Arondekar et al., 2015: 213), ‘[q]ueer archives are all about the soiled and untidy – about leaving your dirty chonies [underpants] on the kitchen table’. To clean up the gap-filled messiness of the archive by giving it one, true narrative – as game designers often do in the interest of telling a compelling story – is to un queer it. The radical charge disappears from a game that satisfies all narrative desires, allows the player to put ephemera into a cogent order, and leaves nothing unexplained.

In other words, queer narrative content (like a queer character or a queer love story) does not necessarily equal a queer game if the ludological mechanics are relentless normative (kopas, 2014; McDaldno and St. Patrick, 2013; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017). Queer game studies theorists have identified certain ludological mechanics (no teleological narrative, no climax, no ‘one right way’ to play) and gameplay affects (slowness, frustration, boredom, orientation toward failure, not ‘fun’) as potentially queer, in that they oppose themselves from traditional, straight game design (Chess, 2016; Halberstam, 2011; Ruberg, 2015; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017). Dimitrios Pavlounis (2016: 581–582) has pointed out with regard to *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) that there is a difference between ‘queerness as topic and queerness as methodology . . . [*Gone Home*’s] narrative structure and game mechanics are grounded in the normative and normalizing logics that its subject matter purports to disrupt’. Pavlounis argues that the queer content of *Gone Home*’s story (two teenage girls falling in love) is out of joint with the normalizing narrative structure and game mechanics by which the game tells it. Despite *Gone Home*’s presentation as a messy archive, ripe for creative exploration, its gating techniques

direct the player toward certain normative interpretations, associations, and assumptions at the expense of others, ultimately writing history in terms of a conventional, teleological three-act structure. In this sense, *Gone Home*’s archival openness is put in tension with storytelling techniques that serve to pull these histories apart, order them, and impose meaning on them. (Pavlounis, 2016: 585)

What often makes an archival adventure satisfying as a player – the fact that there *is* a rich, compelling narrative to be discovered by the attentive explorer – is precisely what hampers its potential as force for (formally) radical storytelling. In *Gone Home*, the player/Katie serves as the force which straightens up the narrative of her lesbian sister, Sam; by finding all the pieces in

the house and organizing them into a neat, teleological narrative, Katie tells a gay story but tells it straight.

In *HoER* and *WRoEF*, the relationship is flipped from that which Pavlounis identifies in *Gone Home*. In these works, the game mechanics are queer – they *do* fulfill the promise of queer archival poetics in their multiplicity, a-linearity, and lack of defined goals – but their narratives are relentlessly normative (and violently so). These narratives situate themselves squarely within straight conceptions of progress, linearity, and teleology. When queer gameplay and queer characters emerge, they are quashed by the formidable force of linear narrative history: the authoritative power of The Charter in *HoER*, the biological power of death in *WRoEF*. Despite the straightening force of these narratives, the queer *form* of these works makes it possible to resist that straightening. The queer main character in *HoER*, Lucius Selig, was stripped of his awesome power and remorselessly obliterated by The Charter, but his work – the other worlds he created, the portals he opened between them, and the archival leftovers that tell his story – all remain and are made available for exploration, reappropriation, and misplay. In *WRoEF*, Edith’s queer ludological reembodyment of her dead family members juxtaposes with the normative (and punishing) heterosexuality of the narrative, in which Edith is fated to die in childbirth.

Much of the fantastical half of *HoER* is devoted to Lucius Selig’s multiverse travel agency, and much of the material in the realistic half explains how it became his downfall. Lucius had the power to traverse and create new worlds. He used this ability to found an ‘Interdimensional Vacation Resort’, which contained destinations like ‘Saint Malibados: the most spectacular beach in the multiverse!’ and a ‘Carboniferous Island’ located on earth 300 million years ago and complete with ‘Gourmet paleo-dishes, prepared with locally sourced pre-extinct species of fish, and garnished with natural ferns’. According to diary entries recovered by The Charter (and available in the living room of the family’s home), Lucius Selig eventually went mad with this power. He claimed the status of a god and was eventually betrayed to The Charter by his lover and acolyte, Christian. After this betrayal, Lucius lost his power. On exploring the rooms upstairs, you learn that his abilities were the result of a ghoulish science experiment gone wrong. Lucius’ father, Emerson, accidentally empowered his young son while conducting his own experiments with immortality. After his fall, Lucius encourages his young nephew, Lex, to read through Emerson’s papers and conduct his own experiments, a process that results in Lex being trapped in another dimension. When the family tries to save Lex, The Charter freezes their home in its present state.

In its most central narrative, *HoER* tells a story of a near-infinite queer power that is abruptly destroyed by normative forces. Those normative forces are, in large part, telling us this story, and to some extent, we can see their point. In his writing, Lucius comes across as erratic, paranoid, increasingly grandiose, cult-leader-esque, and prone to bouts of fury and vengeance. He also, especially in the earlier documents, seems incredibly powerful, focused, optimistic, and in love with Christian. We have access to some of Lucius’ diary entries and business plans, recordings from his disgruntled employees, and accounts of his frustration with what he sees as Christian’s lack of imagination. We can also read a handwritten letter from Christian, after he has drugged and abandoned Lucius in ‘a motel along the highway’. Christian’s letter reads, in part:

The point of all of this was to get you out of the business. It was for our own good (your own good, too). The Charter agents told me you shouldn’t have any lasting effects from the procedure. All they wanted was to stop you from astral projecting. They shut off the part of your mind that allowed you to build Portals Bermuda and to travel there with other people. You should recover fully, unless, of course, you try to project again. They said that would hurt you. Don’t try it.

They told me what you were doing wasn't safe. They said you were behaving recklessly and that you were putting the Universe in danger. You had to be stopped and they needed my help to get close to you, since you were so paranoid. I scheduled your appointment with them.

I don't know about the Universe, but they were right about you behaving recklessly. You're not a god, Lucius Over the last few months I watched the man I knew be replaced by 'Master' Lucius Selig. You were behaving like a bad parody of the Heaven's Gate guy. Only, unlike him, you actually have had power

I hope you understand one day. I hope that you'll be able to forgive me for what I had to do. More than anything I hope you'll see this as a gift, a chance to fix yourself.

Please don't hate me. I love you, Lucius.

Christian

Lucius' response is also part of the written record. The day after Christian's betrayal, Lucius writes,

I've been hurt. They got me. The Charter. It was about a day ago at a book signing. Since then, my memories about that day are going away. The pain comes. Headaches. I black out and when I do, I lose something

I feel – less. And then this morning, when I came to, I tried to travel back to Portals Bermuda, but I couldn't. It hurt. It's like there's an electric fence around my psyche. If I touch it, I black out. I vomit.

Christian helped them. He set me up. He left me a 'dear John' letter on the nightstand. He said I was turning into a monster and that I needed to be stopped

They 'punished' me. They made me suffer. They told me that they would fix me, correct the part of myself that allowed me to travel to other dimensions. The whining sound got worse. My vision was filled with twisting wires; whenever one touched me it sent a shock through my brain. I couldn't close my eyes. The wires were behind my eyes. The way they twisted, never stopping. I've never felt so sick in my life . . . I will not forget this. I will come back.

Lucius' mutilation echoes the logic of queer chemical castration under repressive regimes ('They told me what you were doing wasn't safe . . . I hope you'll see this as a gift, a chance to fix yourself'), as well as the parable of Judas' kiss of Christ ('You had to be stopped and they needed my help to get close to you, since you were so paranoid. I scheduled your appointment with them You're not a god, Lucius').

Once the participant is aware of this narrative, the utter strangeness and incomprehensibility of the fantastical spaces takes on a subversive tone. Many of those spaces have seemingly nothing at all to do with the Selig narrative; they simply exist as testament to a truly wild multiverse, which the participant can encounter but not easily systematize or contextualize. Lucius' power may have been destroyed by The Charter, but the other worlds remain, as demonstration of the vast, inscrutable, unstraighten-able multiverse. The portals he created – between his quotidian family home and the incomprehensible space beyond – highlight the extent to which The Charter did not succeed in containing Lucius' power. It bursts out of almost every room in the house, and the participant is free to delight in the space's surprising multiplicities, a-linearities, and exuberant energies, even if we cannot understand or narrativize them.

In *WRoEF*, another kind of multiplicity and a-linearity is made ludologically possible. In order to understand it, we need a diversion into queer archival theory. The idea that embodied memory and practice form an archive was, around the same time as Schneider's article (2001), becoming central to queer studies/queer performance studies. Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*

(2003) and Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) hinge on the concept of body-as-archive, and these pivotal theorists are interested in the way in which a performance, repeated again and again, becomes itself an archive (or, for a crude paraphrase of Taylor's argument: archives are solid documents and repertoire is repeatable action). These repeated practices are inherently radical and challenging to the status quo; Cvetkovich's (2003) archive of feelings is 'composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history' (p. 268). Drawing from this discourse, Sara Ahmed's (2006: 557) 'Queer Phenomenology' observes the way in which bodies are conditioned toward certain spaces and orientations. Positioning, she argues, is inherited: 'Insofar as we inherit that which is near enough to be available at home, we also inherit orientations, that is, we inherit the nearness of certain objects more than others, which means we inherit ways of inhabiting and extending into space'. To put it another way, we inherit the material practices of our cultural archive. But if we rethink the way we 'normally' interact with the objects in a heteronormative space, we have the opportunity to reorient. As Ahmed (2006: 553, emphasis in original) argues, bodies

acquire orientation **by repeating some actions over others**, as actions that have certain objects in view . . . **the nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual**: it is not just that I find them there, like that. Bodies tend toward some object more than others, given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary; they are the effects of the repetition of 'tending toward'.

While Ahmed is writing about human experience writ large, her claim is even truer in a game space or an archive. Both are spaces which are created with certain orientations and actions available and others completely unavailable, whether that's due to programming/design choices or curatorial choices about which materials to maintain and enable access to. A game's designers are entirely in control of which actions a player can repeat (or *do* at all), which objects are near, and how available they are to our tendencies to play them.

Every time the player enters the memory of a different Finch, the remapped controls attest to the continuous need for reorientation, renegotiation, and refusal to accept any one mapping as normal or normative. By reorienting the player toward the potentialities of space, character, and body, *WRoEF* invites the player to queer the story by entering so many different subjectivities and bodies (through the ludological mechanic of remapped controls). Instead of repeating the same movements and actions again and again, the player in *WRoEF* cannot 'acquire orientation **by repeating some actions over others**' because those actions and orientations change constantly (Ahmed, 2006: 553, emphasis in original). The player is forced to note these shifts – indeed, the player must relearn each new character's possibilities and tendencies in order to progress through the game. Each relative gives the player the opportunity to reevaluate what kind of body they are, or could be, inhabiting.

Conclusion

HoER and *WRoEF* each present the player with a formidable house which has seen the death of every family member who once lived there. In the ancestral home, we are told, many family secrets are hidden, but the family itself is not there; all that remains of them is the house and its objects, a static archive of memories. These games then invite the player into the static archival space and give them the opportunity to enliven it – to re-perform the story, to revivify the characters, to put flesh back onto bone. The player's exploration of the house serves as a way of enfleshing inert archival material, enlivening the space with their presence.

The player, however, is not there to complete the story by neatly stitching up the gaps left in the archive. In these two works, the player's actions *confound* the teleological message of traditional archival research. Although the narratives of these works seem to offer a rather bleak, heteronormative arc, the player has the chance to queer these stories through their actions. In *HoER*, this looks like the player discovering myriad artistic spaces which share barely any connection to the Selig story and seem only to exist as the manifestations of a truly weird multiverse. In *WRoEF*, this looks like players reembodying Edith's deceased relatives with remapped controls, thus forcibly reorienting themselves to the potentialities of other bodies. The multiplicities and contradictions of an archival adventure – filled with both living and dead, both present and past, a heteronormative familial space in which queer things are made possible – charge its contents with narrative potential.

Acknowledgements

Thank you very much to Rob Gallagher, Bonnie Ruberg, R. Lyle Skains, Kurt James Werner, Caroline Egan, Elizabeth Spragins, the Convergence peer reviewers and editors, and colleagues who heard earlier versions of this paper at BACLS 2018 and DiGRA 2018 for their thoughts and critique.

References

- Ahmed S (2006) Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12(4): 543–574.
- Arondekar A, Cvetkovich A, Hanhardt CB, et al. (2015) Queering archives: A roundtable discussion. *Radical History Review* 122: 211–231.
- Artaud A (1989) *Artaud on Theatre*. London: Meuthen Drama.
- Auslander P (2008) *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bachelard G (1969) *The Poetics of Space*, Jolas M (Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Boal A (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Charles A and Maria OLM (Trans.). London: Pluto Press.
- Bogost I (2006) *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Chess S (2016) The queer case of video games: Orgasms, heteronormativity, and video game narrative. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33(1): 84–94.
- Cvetkovich A (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- De Certeau M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Rendall S (Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida J (1995) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Prenowitz E (Trans.). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Fernández-Vara C (2011) Game spaces speak volumes: Indexical storytelling. In: *Proceedings of the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think, Play, Design*. Utrecht School of the Arts: Digital Games Research Association. Available at: <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/game-spaces-speak-volumes-indexical-storytelling/> (accessed 10 April 2019)
- Foucault M (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Sheridan Smith AM (Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Halberstam J (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Järvinen A (2008) *Games without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Jenkins H (2004) Game design as narrative architecture. In: Wardrip-Fruin N and Harrigan P (eds) *First Person*. Boston: MIT Press, pp. 118–130.
- Kagen M (2017) Walking sims, #GamerGate, and the gender of wandering. In: Eburne JP and Schreier B (eds) *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 275–300.

- Kaprow A (1956) *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Kirby M (1984) On acting and not acting. In: Battcock G and Nickas R (eds) *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Dutton, pp. 97–117.
- kopas m (2014) Interrupting play: Queer games & futurity. Available at: <http://mkopas.net/build> (accessed 20 September 2018)
- Mcdaldno A and St. Patrick J (2013) Beyond representation: Queer mechanics in tabletop games. Available at: <http://buriedwithoutceremony.com/beyond-representation/> (accessed 10 April 2019)
- Machon J (2013) *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Manoff M (2004) Theories of the archive from across the disciplines. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4(1): 9–25.
- Manovich L (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Massey D (2010) *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Montfort N (2003) *Twisty Little Passages*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Pavlounis D (2016) Straightening up the archive: Queer historiography, queer play, and the archival politics of *Gone Home*. *Television & New Media* 17(7): 579–594.
- Phelan P (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Phillips A (2015) Shooting to kill: Headshots, twitch reflexes, and the mechropolitics of video games. *Games and Culture* 13(2): 136–152.
- Ruberg B (2015) No fun: The queer potential of video games that annoy, anger, disappoint, sadden, and hurt. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2(2): 108–124.
- Ruberg B and Shaw A (2017) *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ryan ML (2001) Beyond myth and metaphor – The case of narrative in digital media. *Game Studies* 1(1): n.p. Available at: www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/ (accessed 10 April 2019)
- Ryan ML (2015) *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sample M (2014) Location is not compelling (until it is haunted). In: Farman J (ed) *The Mobile Story: Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 68–78.
- Schechner R (1968) 6 axioms for environmental theatre. *The Drama Review* 12(3): 41–64.
- Schneider R (2001) Performance remains. *Journal of the Performing Arts* 6(2): 100–108.
- Sicart M (2008) Defining game mechanics. *Game Studies* 8(2): n.p. Available at: <http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart> (accessed 10 April 2019)
- Steedman C (2001) Something she called a fever: Michelet, Derrida, and dust. *American Historical Review* 106(4): 1159–1180.
- Taylor D (2003) *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ludography

- Giant Sparrow (2017) *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Anapurna Interactive.
- Meow Wolf Collective (2016–present) *House of Eternal Return*. Santa Fe, USA.
- The Fullbright Company (2013) *Gone Home*. The Fullbright Company.

Author biography

Melissa Kagen holds a PhD from Stanford University and is a Lecturer in Digital Media & Gaming at Bangor University in Wales. She has published work in *Game Studies*, *The German Quarterly*, *The Opera Quarterly*, and *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons* (Indiana UP). She is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*.