

Roundtable

Playing with Capital, Capitalizing Play

Respondents

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Response

A key site for clarifying the concept of gaming capital is the game archive. It is there where the manifold forms of capital—intellectual, cultural, political, industrial, reputational, and economic—collide and combine, collapse and multiply. The game archive is a locus where history is fashioned even as ephemera are preserved, where the collocation and concentration of many capitals establish boundaries for the productive, the expressive, and the ideological within the computer game complex. This is particularly true of game archives that include a wide range of artifacts, that is, more than just games and game consoles themselves. If the computer game complex is to be understood as referring to the fulsome networks of technological, industrial, political, ideological, and socio-cultural practices and artifacts that constitute how games mean, then archives that pointedly aim to assemble as many, varied, and interconnected artifacts as possible will likely be in the best position to help visibilize those networks of meaning for researchers.

In a game archive, therefore, each artifact serves at least two roles: first, it expresses part of the medium's infinitely variable genetic code, the proteins of gaming's capital working as the building blocks of the medium's structures, meanings, and implications. Second, it abates the effects of commodity fetishism through its schematically enforced relationships to other proximal objects in the collection. When the single *Aladdin's Castle* game token is connected either by finding aid (e.g., call number) or proximity (or both) to a *Tempest* machine, a collection of Mexican game tokens, a pair of earrings made out of game tokens, a patent application for an arcade token dispensing machine, and a belly-dancing costume outfitted with dozens of jingling game tokens, the multitude of capital networks is readily apparent.

Unfortunately, scholarly game archives are yet rare and inchoate. Most large lots are owned by private collectors, while most public and research libraries have minimal and non-representative collections at best. We argue that an important step in conceptualizing gaming capital is the methodical development of game archives and archival practices. The creation and maintenance of such spaces can effectively (though obviously not entirely) help materialize, operationalize, and problematize questions of capital, gaming and otherwise.

In terms of archival development specifically, we believe (as we suggest above) that it is fundamentally important for archivists to engage especially in the act of indiscriminate collection, at least initially in the acquisition process essential to archive formation. That is, game archives should contain and emphasize the paratextual as well as the textual, paraphernalia as well as principle artifacts (i.e., games and the hardware on which they run). It is precisely in the relationships among artifacts of all kinds--in the industrial, technological, aesthetic, and ideological linkages of an intertext--that capital becomes most visible and thus accessible. Games have a particularly rich and immediate intertext, surrounded as they are by all manner of

consumer goods, fan communities, public discourses, and pullulating technologies, and this intertext needs to be embodied in the organizational and conceptual structures of the game archive itself.

Regarding archival practice beyond indiscriminate collection development, we would militate for a philosophy of use over preservation, or, more accurately, use as preservation. If the materiality, ideology, and importance of production and play are to be understood in any depth, experientiality must be prioritized alongside analysis. More simply, games must be played to be meaningfully understood, even if that play ultimately contravenes their preservation (e.g., wearing out a game cartridge through repeated use). The goal of an archive should be to create new knowledge, not just preserve old sensibilities, and play in general is notably edifying. And though it sometimes pains us to watch it actually happen, we readily abide sacrificing the future's access to the past in order to facilitate the present's fuller understanding of the past to secure a better future.

We realize these are onerous and perhaps even outrageous expectations, intellectually, financially, and temporally. They have certainly made our own lives difficult over the last thirteen years as we have worked to build and maintain the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive. Nevertheless, if the implications of gaming capital are to be understood and deployed effectively, then the most obvious manifestations of that capital--games themselves and their broad belt of constellating objects--need to be fearlessly collected and explored.