Episode 1 Part 1: Why?

Some games are dead or dying.[1] *horror scream* But, we can still save many of them or bring back others to life. So, get your Phoenix Downs or start casting your resurrection spells. *intro fade in song* Let's go! *intro fade out*

Hello and welcome to Deadplay, a podcast on videogame preservation and analysis! My name is Dany Guay-Belanger, and I'll be your host. This podcast was created as part of the major research project for my Master's degree in Public History.

Why did you choose a podcast for academic work?

Yeah, I sometimes get that reaction. There are two reasons why I chose this format. First, I have a somewhat… complicated relationship with academia. I love what comes out of it – the research, when it challenges preconceived ideas. But sometimes, I feel it's out of touch and, honestly, elitist. Academic papers are a good example of this. A lot of them are behind pay-walls – making them hard to access for people with little means – or the language they use is not suitable for an audience outside of academia – some of them are borderline unreadable. I wanted to get away from that. I wanted a medium that would let people enjoy (or hate) what I am doing on their own terms and I wanted to make it accessible. Podcast seemed like a good idea. All you need to listen to a podcast is a smartphone or a computer, and you're good to go! I want this project to reach a wider audience.

On top of that, I come from a Public History background, more particularly one that focuses on neighbourhood activism and applies something called 'sharing authority'.[2] Basically, it means that you give as much power to the people you are researching than you have as a scholar or

academic. I want to get people interested and involved.[3] And the standard academic model is not necessarily the best at creating something more engaging.

I also wanted to recreate the experience of playing a game. I could have created a game, but I didn't have the skills, the means or time to create one. A short documentary would have been more feasible, but I also had the same problem. Podcasting, though, seemed a lot more manageable. Podcasts can be very intimate,[4] and I would argue immersive; similar to a videogame. I follow a podcast on videogames and history called *History Respawned*, hosted by Bob Whitaker and John Harney, two history professors. They describe their podcast as "a show where historians consider historical videogames."[5] Their show is great, but I feel it's targeted more towards academics and game creators. I wanted to focus more on gamers and people who enjoy videogames more generally.

You want to bring in non-academics to do academic work? That doesn't really sound academic.

You're right! This would not be academic work without sources and stuff. So the project has a website, deadplay.net, that has all the scripts (with footnotes!). There's also a full bibliography, a further reading list, links to other sources, and some supporting documents, including a scholarly reflection on the project. Eventually, I'll up all the autoethnographic work, it's just Let's Plays. I'll also put the integral oral history interviews I did for the project, along with their transcript. Basically, everything I can post, I'll post. I want this project to be as open as possible, and if people want to emulate it, they'll have a better idea of how I chose to do it.

That sounds like a lot of material.

Sigh You have no idea. I have a lot of people to thank, but I'll keep that for the last episode. For now, I want to thank all the game studies center I visited, LUDOV and the Residual Media Depot; the museum's I worked with, so the Canada Science and Technology Museum and the Strong Museum of Play. Most of these places are going to be mentioned throughout the podcast, but I'll do formal acknowledgements at the conclusion.

Okay, but aren't we supposed to be talking about videogames?

Yeah, let's move on. James Newman, a scholar from the UK who studies videogame and their preservation, says that when we research old games,[6] "we often find surprisingly little, and what we do find are sometimes unreliable traces of existence."[7] Game studies is a young discipline and there's only a few institutions preserving videogames. One of the largest ones, at least in North America, is the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. But there's also a bunch of smaller game studies centers, like the Laboratoire Universitaire de Documentation et d'Observation Vidéoludiques (LUDOV), at the University of Montreal, and the Residual Media Depot, at Concordia University. I'm mentioning these institutions because I visited them, but there's a bunch of other ones all over the place.

It would be a disservice if I didn't mention the role of other institutions, especially those outside of North America and the West, and collectors. Very often, and since academia and heritage institutions until recently overlooked videogames, collectors and gamers were the ones who preserved games. National institutions, like the Canada Science and Technology Museum (CSTM) have been collecting videogames for decades, but these games have been sitting on shelves. This is where people like me step in.

During the summer of 2017, I interned at the CSTM. I had to assess the museum's software collection and wrote a research report on born-digital artifacts. For those who don't already know, born-digital artifacts are objects whose basic form is digital. Anyway, it's at that point that I discovered the untapped potential of their videogame collection.

Wait, you just said software. I thought this was supposed to be on videogames.

That's because videogames *ARE* software.[8] They might not only be played on computers, but they still are software.[9] This is what makes Deadplay so useful, it doesn't only apply to videogames, but also to software more generally. Videogames are particular, so it's not a perfect match in terms of methodology, but, in a sense, videogame preservation can be a case study for software preservation.

Going back to the Canada Science and Techn Museum, it has several old games on diskettes and cassettes tapes in its collection, mostly from the 1980s. What's interesting about these is that most of the diskettes are unauthorised copies of games. If it wasn't for these copies, the museum wouldn't have much in its collection. And to be honest, I think that without unauthorised copies we would be way worst off in terms of videogame preservation.

But aren't unauthorised copies illegal?

The simple answer is yes. The real answer is it depends. I'll explain why things are much murkier when I talk about emulation in a later episode, but what I'll say about it now concerns access. You have to keep in mind that a lot of people can't access videogames because they are too poor, they don't or can't own every single platform, or simply it's not sold in their country or region of the world. And that's where clones of games and platforms, and cracked games become much more interesting.

In any case, I want to get back to the CSTM's collection. While I was doing research on these games, I discovered *Night Flight*. This game was released in 1980 for the TRS-80, which is a Tandy Corporation (later Radio Shack) computer released in 1977. Apart from the documentation in the museum's collection, I was not able to find any other trace of it. The pamphlet that describes the game says it's an historical videogame set in May 1941, *sound of propeller plane in battle* where the player controls a propeller driven plane and has to take nighttime photographs of the Nazi battleship, the Bismarck, which had broken out of the North Sea and into the North Atlantic. At the same time, the player had to evade enemy fire.[10] *end plane sound* Online databases and wikis, like Moby Games and Giant Bomb, have no information on it.[11] There's some information for two other games with the same name. One that was published by the Tomy Company in 1982 for the Tomy Tutor,[12] and in 1984 for the MSX.[13] The other, is Game Boy Advance game released in 2003.[14] The Internet Archive also has a game of that name released in 1982 and emulated using the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator (or the MAME, if you prefer), but it's part of a collection of software for the Apple II. Maybe it's the same game, but there's no way to tell unless we can read that cassette tape. If it's no longer functional, there's a good chance that the game is dead. So what do we do then? This is the type of question Deadplay tries to answer.

The goal here is to create a methodology to study dead games. I'll cover how games can die in a later episode, but for now all you need to know is that I argue games can die and once they are dead, they can only be experienced through what I call "deadplay". I came up with the term deadplay to describe how someone would play or experience a "dead" game. In episode 2, I will apply this methodology to two games from the CSTM's collection, namely *Joust* and *The Seven Cities of Gold.*

What I propose is not the end all be all; it's still a work in progress. I invite listeners, both from and outside academia, to critique and appropriate it. My goal here is to stimulate discussion, not to provide a definite answer. A lot of what I'm researching is still in flux, both in terms of method, but also in subject matter. Part of this work is trying to capture experiences, moments. I interviewed nineteen people for this project and one of them, Skot Deeming, had an interesting take on doing scholarly work and projects like mine:

> Skot: 'Recently, I've realised that no matter, no matter what knowledge I claim to possess I really don't know…
> Dany: [small laugh]
> Skot: 'much about anything anymore,
> Dany: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'
> Skot: 'you know? And I think that like, I think that like, if we, if we actually, like, just put that my subject position is that I know nothing'
> Dany: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'
> Skot: 'hum, and let's proceed from there, you know?
> Dany: 'Yeah.'
> Skot: 'How do we preserve a moment? Who the fuck knows?'
> Dany: [loud laugh]

This is exactly the stance I'm taking. I. Don't. Know.

As a side note, please keep in mind that I am not going deep into techniques for preserving videogames. The exact way to preserve them is outside the scope of this podcast. My focus is more on *what* should be preserved and what to use to study and research videogames, rather than how to preserve them. It's still a very important topic, so I put resources on that subject on the website. This leads me to ask my first question about videogames. It's a question that might seem simple, but in reality, is incredibly complicated. What's a videogame?

Thank you for listening! In the next episode, we try to answer the question "What's a videogame?" Please stay tuned! I would like to thank Rebecca Baker, who is the other voice you heard throughout the podcast, and Racoon City Massacre for giving me permission to use their music. The theme song for Deadplay comes from their song "Where They Walk Alone." You can

find more of their music on Bandcamp. *outro* They also have a Facebook page and a Twitter!

Thank you so much and see you next time! *end*

[1] James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

[2] Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," Journal of Canadian Studies 43, no. 1 (2009): 12-34.

[3] Podcasts also have the potential to create and stimulate discussion between listeners and producers. See Kate Lacey, "Smart Radio and Audio Apps: The Politics and Paradoxes of Listening to (Anti-) Social Media" *Australian Journalism Review* 36, no. 2 (2014): 77-90.

[4] Richard Berry, "Podcasting: Considering the Evolution of the Medium and its Association with the Word 'Radio'," *The Radio Journal –International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (2016): 13.

[5] "About Us," History Respawned, accessed April 10, 2017, http://www.historyrespawned.com/contact-us/. Sadly, at the time I am writing this (June 3, 2018), the History Respawned website is being updated. It has not been accessible for some time.

[6] The concept of what is old or new is problematic when applied to technology or ideas. While an object or technology might be new, its use might not. David Edgerton gives the example of genetic engineering and argues that it "is discussed as if there had never been any other means of changing animals or plants, let alone other means of increasing food supply." He continues by stating that a "history of how things were done in the past, and of the way past futurology has worked, will undermine most contemporary claims to novelty." See David Edgerton, introduction to *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). When applied to videogames, entertainment is nothing new. This more recent iteration of popular culture draws inspiration from and has close ties to other forms of artistic media, such as comic books, film, literature, etc. See Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Videogames* (East Sussex: Yellow Ant, 2010).

[7] Newman, *Best Before*, 3.

[8] Ibid, 137-139.

[9] Henry Lowood, "Playing History with Games: Steps towards Historical Archives of Computer Gaming," (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Portland, Oregon, June 14, 2004), http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/emg/library/pdf/lowood/Lowood-EMG2004.pdf.

[10] Program Documentation: Night Flight, Peterborough: Instant Software Inc., 1980, 19910.0400, Ingenium Communications Collection, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

[11] While these databases are not academic, they have done excellent work gathering and making accessible information on the videogames in their database. They are one of the best sources available at the moment. Raiford Guins addresses this situation when discussing the use of such sources by academica. He argues that "works that may have once seemed 'nonacademic or lacking in seriousness' are now valuable primary sources" (cited in Hodges 2017, 1585). In the case of videogames, scholars are forced to use non-academic sources as there was not much done by academia on the subject until recently. See James A. Hodges, "How do I Hold this Thing? Controlling Reconstructed Q*berts," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 10 (2017): 1581-1598. See also Raiford Guins, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Videogame Afterlife* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).

[12] See "Night Flight For Tomy Tutor (1982) – MobyGames," MobyGames, accessed May 27, 2018, http://www.mobygames.com/game/tomy-tutor/night-flight and "Night Flight," Giant Bomb, accessed May 27, 2018, https://www.giantbomb.com/night-flight/3030-60185/.

[13] See "Night Flight (Game) - Giant Bomb," Giant Bomb, accessed May 27, 2018, http://www.mobygames.com/game/msx/night-flight_.

[14] See "Night Flight for Game Boy Advance (2002 - MobyGames)," MobyGames, accessed May 27, 2018, http://www.mobygames.com/game/gameboy-advance/night-flight.