

Episode 2 Part 2: Advanced Practical Necromancy

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. Last time, we talked about zombie games, and about *Joust* and *SCOG*. Today, we talk about the future of videogame reanimation through what historians call 'oral history', as well as Let's Plays and emulation.

When I went to the Strong Museum of Play, I discovered so much information about *Joust* and *SCOG*. But the reason why I mentioned everything, apart from the fact that I was being an overexcited dork, wasn't clear. Think back to when I was talking about some zombies being closer to the human they were before their death. If you have a truly mindless zombie, there's only so much we can use to figure out who they were. Imagine a zombie apocalypse scenario and a biker who's been bitten by a zombie crashes because he's turning into a zombie. Say that zombie biker is stuck under their motorcycle and you happen to walk by it. You might be able to tell something about who that zombie was by looking at its clothes, its boots, or the motorcycle. You could also get much more information if you could get a hold of their wallet or the motorcycle's registration papers. If we could stuff a USB key containing personal information about the zombie and perhaps some of its memories in its pockets or if we found a way to reinject what's on the USB key into the zombie's mind, then it would be closer to who it was before. Or at least we could learn something about them. Well all that material is what would be on that hypothetical USB key.

Very often, when you play an emulation, there's not so much information on the game: its publishing information, the year it came out, some plot information, things of that nature. The

Internet Archive is pretty good at that and you can see that on their browser emulation of the commemorative edition of *SCOG*.² But even then, there is a lot more contextual information that could help someone understand the game, how people played it, and what it meant to players at the time. For me, it's only logical to give background information on a game before you play the emulation, especially if its for research purposes. There's one last option we didn't cover in the last episode, interviews.

Interviewing game creators is a fairly common thing, but oral histories of gamers are less so. I did 19 oral history interviews of people who play videogames. My methodology was inspired by life story interviews, meaning that I was asking more general question to my interviewees, in order to get more context and understand how games were a part of their lives. However, I directed the conversation towards my respondents' encounters with videogames and eventually asked if they'd ever heard of Joust and *SCOG*.

This tactic let me better understand the importance of unauthorised copies for instance. When I started the project, I already thought they were worthy of study and should be an integral part of preservation efforts. But I didn't really understand how important unauthorised copies could be for people, especially for those outside of a middle-class and Western context. Two of my interviewees, Sara and Ali, were raised in the Middle East. And if it wasn't for unauthorised copies of games, they would not have played as many games as they had. They could only encounter 'American' videogame culture via bootlegs, via counterculture, via illegal networks. The only way they could participate in the culture was with unauthorised copies. Games, like many other things, create in and out groups. This is the result of a groups culture, marketing decisions, foreign policy, political choices, and so on. In any case, that's why I put so much emphasis on unauthorised copies in episode 1 part 3.

The games you were studying were from the 80s, though. Did that have an impact on your interviews?

Most of my interviewees either did not know *Joust* or *SCOG*, only knew them by name, or their memories were too vague for them to have anything worthwhile to contribute. The ones that did have more vivid memories were usually in their forties. In fact, there were only two interviewees that had tangible memories of those games. You already heard from Skot, but you'll also hear from Jean-Pierre, whose interview was in French. Like I did for Dominic, I will give a short description of his clips after you hear them. I will also post a translation and transcription of the clips on the script. So, go on the website! I know, I'm repeating myself. But I really want you to go check it out!

I asked my interviewees if they had played *Joust*. Here are some stories from Skot on *Joust*:

“Dany: ‘Have you ever played *Joust*?’

Skot: ‘Oh yes! Lots of *Joust*. Hum both the arcade and the Atari 2600 version’

Dany: ‘Nice!’

Skot: ‘Yeah there was, hum, a [laugh] actually when I lived in Toronto, when I was working in post-production, when I first moved there, in like the early 2000s, hum, there was this store called Monster Records on Yonge Street that had a *Joust* machine in the back’

Dany: ‘Nice.’

Skot: ‘that I had the high score on for a while.’

Dany: ‘Wow!’

Skot: ‘Hum big *Joust* fan.’

Dany: ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah.’

Skot: ‘Even, even as a kid, like playing that on the Atari’

Dany: ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah’

Skot: ‘Hum, you know, which was a very, different, and sort of low-fi version of the same game, like, the resolution was so low compared’

Dany: ‘Yeah’

Skot: ‘compared to the arcade version, that it's just like, I'm, that's just a bird with a pointy stick.’

Jean-Pierre's perspective was slightly different:

Original:

Dany : ‘[...] as-tu joué à Joust?’

Jean-Pierre: [enthusiastically] ‘Oui j’ai joué à *Joust*! J’ai joué à *Joust*, dans l’arcade pis à la maison.’

Dany: ‘Hum, tu peux-tu, ben dans le fond, juste me parler de, de, de l’expérience, pis après ça j’ai une question un peu plus euh pointu...’

Jean-Pierre: ‘*Joust* c’était un des jeux les plus frustrant au monde.’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘Sauter, juste pour manquer le coin parce que les pixels étaient pas bon,’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘pis tu tombais en bas. Je voulais gueuler constamment.’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘C’était un des jeux, j’ai, mais en même c’est un de ces jeux que tu veux juste le battre.’

Dany: ‘Ouais’ [understandingly]

Jean-Pierre: ‘Tu veux juste le battre. T’sais là tu veux que ton autruche ponde son œuf.’

English Translation:

Dany : ‘[...] Did you play Joust?’

Jean-Pierre: [enthusiastically] ‘Yes, I played Joust! I played Joust, in the arcade and at home.’

[...]

Jean-Pierre: ‘Joust was one of the most frustrating games in the world.’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘Jumping, just to miss the corner because the pixels were bad,’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘and then, you fell down. I constantly wanted to scream.’

Dany: [Laughs]

Jean-Pierre: ‘It was one of these games that, well at the same time, it was one of these games that you just wanted to beat.’

Dany: ‘Ouais’ [understandingly]

Jean-Pierre: ‘You just want to beat it. You know, you just want your ostrich to lay its egg.’”

Here, Jean-Pierre is telling us that, for him, *Joust* was one of the most frustrating games in the world. That you kept missing corners because the pixels were so bad. But at the same time, you just wanted to beat it. You wanted to beat that game and you wanted your ostrich to lay its egg.

These clips are very short, but they tell us that this was a hard and, for some, frustrating game; that

the graphics at the time were limited, especially for home consoles like the Atari 2600. At the same time though, it was a fun and addicting game.

For *SCOG*, the only person that had memories of that game was Jean-Pierre. It's not much but what he remembers is so very interesting:

Original:

Dany: 'un autre jeu qui était euh The Seven Cities of Gold?'
 Jean-Pierre: 'Celle-là je l'ai pas joué, je l'ai juste regardé.'
 Dany: 'Okay!'
 Jean-Pierre: 'C'était un des jeux d'arcade...'
 Dany: 'Hum' [interested]
 Jean-Pierre: 'à un moment donné. Y'a eu une version d'arcade'
 Dany: 'Hum' [interested]
 Jean-Pierre: 'euh qui a fait faillite parce qu'il était trop difficile.'
 Dany: 'Okay.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'Euh, parce que y'ont pris certains jeux, pis ils les ont remis à l'arcade'
 Dany: 'Ouais.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'des jeux de PC qui ont mis à l'arcade'
 Dany: 'Okay.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'qui était des faillites parce que y'é... ça fonctionnait bien au PC ou...'
 Dany: 'Ouais, ouais, ouais.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'Alors, je l'ai pas vraiment joué, je connais juste l'avoir vu ou'
 Dany: 'Okay, okay.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'quelque chose de ce genre-là.'

English Translation:

Dany: '[...] another game that, hum, The Seven Cities of Gold?'
 Jean-Pierre: 'That one, I didn't play it. I just watched it.'
 Dany: 'Okay!'
 Jean-Pierre: 'It was an arcade game,'
 Dany: 'Hum' [interested]
 Jean-Pierre: 'at one point. There was an arcade version.'
 Dany: 'Hum' [interested]
 Jean-Pierre: 'hum, that went bankrupt because it was too hard.'
 Dany: 'Okay.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'Hum, because they took certain games and the put them in arcades,'
 Dany: 'Ouais.'
 Jean-Pierre: 'PC games that they put in arcades'

Dany: 'Okay.'

Jean-Pierre: 'that went bankrupt because th... it worked well on PC or...'

Dany: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

Jean-Pierre: 'So I did not really play it. I only knew watching it or'

Dany: 'Okay, okay.'

Jean-Pierre: 'something like that.'"

Basically, Jean-Pierre says that he did not play the game, but watched others play it. The version he experienced was an arcade version that was a failure. He says that some successful PC games were ported to arcades, but that didn't work so well. However, Jean-Pierre used the word "bankrupt". I interpret this as no one would play these games, at least not enough to make them profitable. This clip is so important. Jean-Pierre tells us that there was an arcade version of the game. I asked the people at the Strong, and no one had heard of it. I also can't find anything about it online. That version might be dead, and that is kind of exciting... in a weird way. Like, is this an *E.T.* situation, where cartridges of the *E.T.* game were buried in some landfill? Were the *SCOG* arcade cabinets gotten rid of because they were so bad? Sometimes the death of a game is what makes interesting stories. This is an example of why interviewing players is so important.

Sure, but interviews don't tell you how the game looked. I mean as much as footage of the game would.

I totally agree. This is why Let's Plays are one of the other things I wanted to mention. For those who don't already know it, a Let's Play (LP) is when someone documents and comments on a playthrough of a game using video recordings. There's multiple ways of doing it, some Let's Players will record their faces, others won't. Some comment more on the game, other will continuously make jokes. They can tell us a lot about how a game was played, its community, and the context it was played in. Especially if the LPs were recorded at the time the game was played. This could be somewhat problematic with older games because LPs didn't exist in the 80s, for

instance. Still, if we record some now, they are a useful tactic for the future of videogame preservation.

Furthermore, some researchers have been advocating using LPs with research methodologies. Sonja C. Sapach recently wrote an interesting article on First Person Scholar describing how she proposes to do this. While she doesn't research or analyse other people's LPs, she records her own and then watches them to analyse her reactions. However, she keeps her LPs private – she doesn't share them.³ For her research purposes, it makes sense. Sapach's research deals with difficult and very personal experiences.⁴ For myself, I would want LPs to be public, because my background is rooted in public history and preservation. The way I deal with difficult knowledge is through shared authority, which I mentioned in episode 1 part 1. Basically, my interviewees and I have the same amount of power and control when I conduct the interview. And if they want to remove stuff from an interview for any reasons, they can. In this case, Sapach filmed herself; she is both the researcher and the research subject. Therefore, she does whatever she wants with that footage. In a way though, the LPs aura is still going to be part of her research. So, it's not like we are entirely losing it, even though it's not made public.

I'm sure there are a lot of people that would be willing to share their videos.

Definitely. There's plenty of researchers or players who would be open to have their footage made available, even if it's only in an archive. But openly shared or not, Let's Plays preserve videogames. When players record them, it tells us something about the community that plays the game and how it is thought of at the time. And when researchers create LPs, for preservation or research purposes, they can be more focused on a particular aspect of a game. Plus, this would allow for both a subjective and objective analysis, since the person recording the LP would be player and researcher.⁵ Re-watching the footage, you can even analyse yourself and your

reactions. Both types of LPs tell us different things about the games, so they are both important ways to preserve gameplay. When games become unplayable, LPs could be some of the only things left that tell us something about how the game was played. Finding and preserving Let's Plays, or recording them specifically for preservation purposes, could help future researchers to investigate games they might not be able to play. Preserving different kinds of LPs also means preserving different types of experiences. Like the experience of playing a game in an arcade, on a console, or on mobile.

Is anyone else doing something like that right now?

There was project at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision that set up a table with an original Commodore 64 console and recorded people playing games. That institute has a museum that features exhibitions of Dutch audio-visual cultural heritage. This gave researchers access to “a steady flow of visitors from a wide range of demographics that [they] could invite to participate to their Let's Play project.”⁶ Most of the time, it was a recording of two people, sometimes three.⁷ What was particularly interesting about the way they went about it, was the interaction of the people being recorded. For instance, there's one recording when a child and their mother played a game. For that child, the game was not going fast enough. Their mother responded by saying that's how it was at the time.⁸ With it, we can see the interaction between someone who grew up on 1980s games and younger people who didn't. This tells us so much about how games and players have changed. To me, this a truly novel idea and it also lets us preserve human-machine interactions.⁹

I put up some very basic LPs of *Joust* and *SCOG* I recorded on deadplay.net. They are kind of basic and “rambly”, but I think that form of analysis is useful. So, I wanted to try to record them just to learn how to do it. I like my reaction to my introduction to Indigenous characters in *SCOG*.

I won't say what it is, you'll just have to go see for yourself. LPs are one way to preserve games and their context, but as I have been saying throughout this podcast, we can't treat videogames in a vacuum. And it's the same thing for their preservation.

But still, even with the ability to watch a LP, wouldn't the best way to understand a game be to play it?

Yep! And this is where emulation becomes really important. Like I said, games die. And since this is inevitable, we are going to have to play emulated versions. Both *Joust* and *SCOG* have various emulated versions. They are all over the place, like on emuparadise.me¹⁰ and via browser emulators. I played some of the ones available on the Internet Archive. Actually, my LPS are of emulations. There is a lot of literature that covers emulation. I used some of it throughout the podcast, but I will put up some links on deadplay.net for those interested in reading it.¹¹ I already mentioned the legal issues with emulation in episode 1 part 3 and issues of the controls in the last episode. James Newman in *Best Before* put it best. He said that if a game does not look like, sound like, is controlled like, and play like the original, "then to what extent is it an appropriate archival or display resource?"¹² There exists a lot of emulations out there, and perhaps some of them are good enough to consider them for preservation. But most of the time, emulators and ROMs are abandoned, never to be finished or updated, because they are created and maintained by groups of volunteers.¹³ We need better support and methodology for emulation. And it can't only come from people who work on emulation when they can spare the time or from the videogame industry. For those who didn't know, a lot of the re-released collections of 'classics' are emulations.¹⁴ There is a lot of talk concerning emulation. In February 2018, Stanford University held a Video Game Preservation Workshop, and emulation was one of the main topics for discussion.¹⁵

I think where the real future of videogame preservation lies is in the combination of oral histories, Let's Plays, and emulation, not to mention all of the other things I made part of my list. Hardware inevitably fails, so in the long-run, only banking on that won't work.¹⁶ So we have to rely on emulation. Some game studies centers and heritage institutions might be able to build an emulation that feels similar to the original, but, like I said in episode 1, chasing the original is basically impossible. So, having a solid emulation combined with Let's Plays, oral histories, a solid contextual information seems like a strong combination.

There's even a project called The Console Living Room that recreated a mid-1980s living room setting.¹⁷ It let's people experience 1980s videogames in a living room typical of the time. Perhaps one day, sets like this will be commonplace and, after the inevitable death of hardware, emulated versions of games will continue to make this work.

I know that the list is incomplete. I need your help. Yes, you! If you know more about these games, or have a game you want to see preserved, please contact me. All the info is also on deadplay.net so you don't have to write it down.

You can also start doing this yourself. Go through your closets, basements, parents' basements, and find your old games. If you can play them, do it! Record yourself if you can or just write about your experience, your memories. If you want to share your memories, I'd be more than happy to interview you. You can also donate your old games and platforms to your local science and technology museum. Everyone has a role to play when it comes to videogame preservation. I'm doing my part with this project, some scholars are analysing them, heritage institutions are preserving them. But none of this would be feasible without the people who play videogames. Games and gameplay are so much more than entertainment. And as Raiford Guins recently said on the *8Bit Test Pit* podcast, which is run by archeologists, when he was talking about the panels

of arcade cabinets, they're much more than what we see on the screen.¹⁸ Videogames are cultural heritage,¹⁹ and we need to save them before it's too late. Because everything not saved will be lost.

outro music Well that's all folks! In this series, we went over what's a videogame, how they can die, and some of the ways to revive them. I guess I should be sad that our journey is coming to an end. Or is it...? *disk scratch and stop music* Actually, I plan on trying to keep this project alive. This is one of the reasons why I want feedback. Please, please, please, comment on this, suggest stuff I forgot. I will be embedding a Hypothes.is UI on the website for people to leave comments, it's really easy to use. Ideally, I want to continue this podcast. Maybe I can apply my methodology in its entirety and not just briefly like I just did. The more I think about it, the more I want to do a complete series on Danielle Bunten Berry's work. I was touched by what I found. At first, I thought it was just going to be a regular game designer's story of the 80s. But no, she has a very interesting story. She made great games. She can be an inspiration for many aspiring game creators.

I would like to thank everyone who supported me through this. My colleagues, my professors, and my supervisors (Shawn Graham and Andrew Johnston) who believed in me and guided me towards what I'm doing now. The people at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, particularly Sean Tudor and Tom Everett, who gave me the connections and opportunities I needed to do this. Also, I would like to thank LUDOV, the Residual Media Depot, and the Strong Museum of Play, and all the people who work at these places for helping me. I can't forget the places that let me put up posters to recruit interviewees. In Ottawa, I put my posters at Cash For Games Canada Inc, the Microplay on Bank Street at the corner of Napean, Chumleighs, and GameZetera. In Montreal, my posters were up at Three Kings Loot and at GameZone. I particularly want to thank GameZone because they are one of the last places where you can rent

movies and games in Montreal, and they also sell new and second-hand games. They are located in Verdun, and if you are in the area, you should definitely go check them out. More importantly, I want to thank my interviewees: Adam, Alex, Ali, Asen, Axel, Chuck, Daliah, David, Dominic, Félix, Hugo, Jean-Pierre, Judith, Matthew, Ralph, Sara, Skot, and the ones who wanted to remain anonymous. Also, thanks to Hasi Eldib of the Media Production Center for helping me with the more technical aspects of building this project. I want to thank my friends and Rebecca Baker who were all there for me when I needed them. Finally, I have to thank you, my listeners. You are the ones who make this worthwhile.

In any case, I invite you to stay tuned, even if the next episode might take a while to come out. By the time you hear this, I'll be looking for a job and I don't know how much time I'll be able to devote to this project. In the hopes I can keep this alive, see you next time on Deadplay! As always, 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!

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

² "Seven Cities of Gold : Ozark Softscape, SEGA Interactive Development Division : Free Borrow & Streaming : Internet Archive," *Internet Archive*, accessed June 3, 2018, https://archive.org/details/msdos_Seven_Cities_of_Gold_Commemorative_Edition_1993.

³ Sonja C. Sapach, "Let's Plays with Research Methodologies," accessed June 2, 2018, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/lets-play-with-research-methodologies/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ René Glas, Jesse de Vos, Jasper Van Vught, and Hugo Zijlstra, "'Let's Play' Videos, Game Preservation, and the Exhibition of Play," in *The Interactive Past: Archeology, Heritage & Videogames*, edited by Angus A.A. Mol, Csilla E. Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, Krijin H. J. Boom, and Aris Politopoulos (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), https://www.scribd.com/embeds/348615539/content?start_page=1&view_mode=scroll&access_key=key-GKqNp4IJ1kYgWbo34HgU&show_recommendations=false, 141.

⁷ Ibid, 140.

⁸ Ibid, 145.

⁹ Ibid, 147.

¹⁰ “Play classic video games on your computer or mobile device | Emuparadise,” Emuparadise, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://www.emuparadise.me/>. While editing the script, I noticed that the website was actually emuparadise.me and not emuparadise.com. My apologies.

¹¹ See David S.H. Rosenthal, “Emulation & Virtualization as Preservation Strategies,” “report, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2015), <https://mellon.org/Rosenthal-Emulation-2015> and Leluse Johnston, “Considering Emulation for Digital Preservation,” Library of Congress, last modified February 11, 2014, <https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2014/02/considering-emulation-for-digital-preservation/>.

¹² Newman, *Best Before*, 37.

¹³ Mark Guttenbrunner, Christoph Becker, and Andreas Rauber, “Keeping the Game Alive: Evaluating Strategies for the Preservation of Console Video Games,” *International Journal of Digital Curation* 5, no. 1 (2010): 87 cited in Newman, *Best Before*, 144.

¹⁴ Newman, *Best Before*, 29.

¹⁵ “Video Game Preservation Workshop: Setting the Stage for Multi-Partner Projects, Thu, Feb 22, 2018 at 9:00 PM | Eventbrite,” Eventbrite, accessed June 3, 2018, https://www.eventbrite.com/e/video-game-preservation-workshop-setting-the-stage-for-multi-partner-projects-tickets-39405135822?utm_source=eb_email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=event_reminder&utm_term=eventname.

¹⁶ Glas and al., “‘Let’s Play’ Videos, Game Preservation, and the Exhibition of Play,” 147.

¹⁷ “The Console Living Room | Back to the Future of Media Convergence,” The Console Living Room, accessed June 3, 2018, <http://www.consolelivingroom.net/>. Interestingly, the header of this website is a picture of an Atari 2600 console with a Joust cartridge inserted into it.

¹⁸ Raiford Guins and Andrew Reinhard, “Raiford Guins & The History of Games - Episode 8,” April 15, 2017, in *8Bit Test Pit*, podcast, MP3 audio, 41:40, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.archaeologypodcastnetwork.com/8btp/>.

¹⁹ Glas and al., “‘Let’s Play’ Videos, Game Preservation, and the Exhibition of Play,” 147.