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**Change information and video games: Introduction, background, and scope**

Video games are a highly dynamic media format that pose unique challenges for collection. They are complex, compound objects that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, as assemblages of software, hardware, and continuous sites of community and enthusiast production and reproduction. Further, a video game's release to the public is rarely an end to its development lifecycle. *Many* video games continue to receive some form of updates for stability, added features, ports to new consoles/formats, remasters, remakes, or restoration well after their initial release. Some video games exist in pre-release beta or alpha versions for years and receive continuous care in perpetuity. So then, how can the dynamic nature of video games and the versions that they embody be archived? One way to track and record the dynamic nature of the game object is through "context materials" (Skold, 2016) such as change information recorded and published in formats like developer logs ("devlogs"), changelogs, news/updates pages, bug fixes, and other update information. *This paper will argue for the value of capturing change information documentation and suggest some practical approaches for collection.*

Skold (2016) suggests that an "expanded notion" of video games and video game preservation is of archival interest for its relevance to topics like technology (hardware or software), culture and society (digital or analog), play, and socio-computational history. In this "expanded" view of the video game, the targets of collection are widened beyond the software that represents the game itself or the hardware it is intended to be played on. This project is not directly focused on the collection or preservation of video games themselves. Instead, this collection project aims to address aspects of "cooperation" and the "collection and creation of 'context materials'" (Skold, 2016) that surround video game production, community, and

communication. The point of this project is to examine and record how developers communicate with players, react to feedback, incorporate changes, and record changes and process through video game distribution platforms like Steam (store.steampowered.com), itch.io, and GOG (www.gog.com). This project would create a record that can help users understand how video games change, and how the *way* they change has evolved over time. This paper also suggests that digital distribution platforms are, in and of themselves, worth consideration as a part of how stakeholders engage with video games, expanding further on Skold's "expanded notion." Distribution platforms are evolving sites for exploring how players access, think about, and interface with modern games because they are critical intermediaries between the user/player, developers, other industry stakeholders, and general community activities.

The "expanded notion" of video games is further supported by literature on video game archiving, which calls for forums or born-digital communications (Colby, 2021), records of assets and art (Bachell & Barr, 2014; Lowood, 2023), digital culture (Skold, 2016), gameplay or process recordings (Manning, 2017), version or change information (Lowood, 2023; Bachell & Barr, 2014; Manning, 2017), and "documentation of context" (Skold, 2016. Also discussed by Kraus & Donahue, 2012; Ruberg, 2017) as potential areas of interest for archival collections. Publicly-shared change information, created by developers to inform the players about the current/changing state of the game, fit somewhere among each of these areas of interest. The public, digital record of change presents a method of tracking video game dynamism, production processes *after* the game has been released or partially released, *and* recording aspects of developer-player communication. Because this information is routinely shared with consumers or fans in public-facing, forum-like posts on digital distribution platforms, it is a form of sort of born-digital correspondence. The expected format of change information documents hosted on

PC digital distribution platforms are often text but may include videos, images, GIFs, links, or other interactables.

Publicly shared change information should be distinguished from--but placed into context alongside--related materials. Bachell and Barr (2014) indicated that some developers use version control in the development process "to archive and monitor changes in game version" and as backups to recover earlier builds (pg. 154). Version control and change logs ("configuration management tools") used to track game versions in development are a related material on the technical end. What this project aims to capture is not necessarily internal-use technical change information, but communications *about* change in the form of published content for public consumption. These documents may relate and overlap in reality. Developer-produced change documentation (for internal use) is an area of interest, but is not the primary focus of this project. It will be discussed in the "methods" "related areas for collection" sections. This paper also recognizes the potential for (and challenges of) working with developers to archive of legacy versions of the video games themselves, or similar peripheral video game objects like demos. Though game versions are largely outside of the scope of *this* project, it could be a future area of interest.

Video games and video game-related culture has diversified from the physical artifact in many ways. Blog-style developer updates are an evolving format for developer-player communication, enabled by centralized distribution platforms like Steam. In the same way that a repository might collect game manual ephemera associated with a physical copy, born-digital change communications are a part of the modern experience of gaming and they are vulnerable to loss without intervention. Again, physical communications (such as game manuals, forms of physical versioning, or cartridges/disks with different game versions) are related materials, but

they are outside of the scope of *this* collection project. And for further clarification: video games exist on many platforms. The scope of this collection project is limited to PC video games as a starting point. However, the logic of capturing change information communications may be extended to collection in console or mobile video game environments.

As a final introductory note, video game archiving is a developed practice among video game enthusiasts. Collection and archiving for hardware (e.g., the National Videogame Museum), video game culture materials (e.g., the Video Game History Foundation's digital library project or the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive's collection), records of creation processes (e.g., the Video Game History Foundation's media assets archive and archival collections), and game preservation and restoration (e.g., GOG's preservation program) are established practices in the topical area of video games. These efforts collect a wide variety of materials like source code, ephemera, hardware, peripherals, paratexts, and many others. The hope for this project is to compliment and refer to existing preservation and archival activities about video game media and culture.

This project will engage with the idea of community-based, DIY, or non-institutional archival activities by developers, fans, or others. Fan translations, reconstructions, restoration, and personal collections are a few of the wide variety of activities that video game enthusiasts participate in (see communities like: https://www.reddit.com/r/GamePreservationists/). Games enthusiasts also contribute in semi-archival activities like the steamdb.info site, which captures Steam data and packages it "to give more insight into the Steam database." (SteamDB, n.d.). This kind of site displays a vast amount of data about video games and their use statistics, but are not necessarily scholarship or preservation oriented. The value of these efforts should not be discounted when considering the preservation of video games and video game culture

(non-professional archival collections relating to video game objects is discussed by deWinter & Kocurek, 2017; Kraus & Donahue, 2012). This project aims to contribute to that general body of collected materials, and it benefits from those existing projects as a jumping-off point. SteamDB, as an example, played a significant part in forming the methods section of this paper, and that attribution is relevant. It is imperative that this collection is free to access, open, digitally available, and sharable, as the records themselves are contingent upon and complement existing approaches to video game archiving. Change information means nothing without the greater context in which it was created and, as paratext, it supports and adds nuance to existing collections.

## A brief overview of relevant stakeholders

The stakeholders for this collection project are, generally, video game developers, enthusiasts/fans, and researchers (of any capacity) of PC video games and video games in culture. As discussed by Bachell and Barr (2014), internal change information is valuable to developers in the game-making process. Publicly shared change information is an extension of that recording process and provides valuable reflections on artistic and developmental processes (discussed below). Bachell and Barr quote a developer interviewee, stating "as well as preserving the games themselves, you also have to preserve as much of the development process as possible; the documentation, the designer's thoughts. And not just the designer, everyone who worked on the game, everyone has their creative input and that input happens for a reason." (pg. 154). Change information and communication about game states articulates that creative input in unique ways, repackaged for the public eye to convey important information about what the game is to its audience. This may be useful to other developers, others in the industry, or to

individuals who are learning about video game production (and how production processes are communicated to the public).

Fans, players, and non-developer enthusiasts are another primary stakeholder group under consideration for this collection. Generally, this project's scope touches on fan-developer interactions; players are the in-context beneficiaries of publicly shared change information. Fans and enthusiasts, now and in the future, may be interested in browsing a well-organized collection of change information about the games that they interact with. There is some existing precedence for this as well. SteamDB, for example, functions on enthusiast interest in seeing peripheral information about the games that they engage with (e.g., usage statistics, price changes, and change information). Communications about change/versioning is not only a passively-received or incidental part of the modern experience of video games. Rather, many enthusiasts are interested in the practices and processes of game-making about their favorite games. Further, video games are often modded by fans. Modders occupy a space between enthusiast and developer and create their own form of product, contingent on an existing video game media object. They may be beneficiaries of change information, produce their own change information (e.g., *mods* patch notes), and there is evidence of their presence in some change information as developers communicate directly about modding activities (Figure 1).

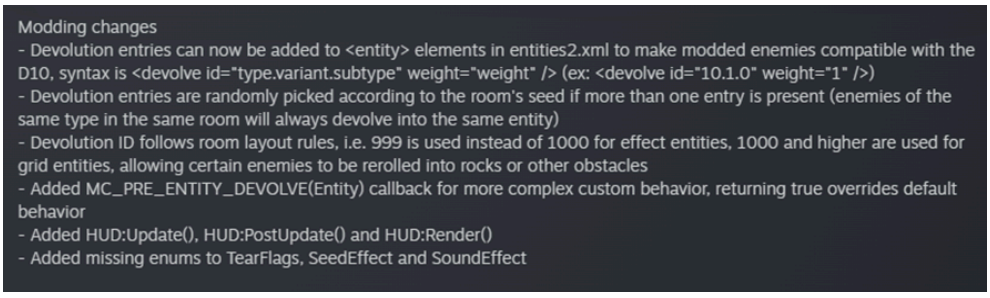


*Figure 1*. Screenshot of a section of a "small update/patch notes" post for the Binding of Isaac, posted Nov. 10, 2022 on the Binding of Isaac's Steam activity feed.

"Developer" and "enthusiast/player" are far from mutually exclusive categories, and this collection project will complicate that relationship. Many players are developers and *most* developers are enthusiasts in their own right. "Players" themselves may embody various relationships with developers and the media itself. For example, not everyone who plays a game is necessarily a fan of that game. Individuals might play to critique, to review, to analyze, or to disparage that media. As such, some interactions and public communications may be adversarial. Evidence of cooperation, overlap, and adversarial interactions are *all* in the interest of this project, to record and incorporate these complex creator-player-media relationships.

Researchers (of any capacity, scholarly or otherwise) are another important stakeholder to whom this collection project is relevant. Video games sit simultaneously between technology, interactive art, digital art, entertainment, and industry/business (Colby et al., 2021; Lowood, 2023). Video games are a popular and profitable entertainment format (Lowood, 2023), and researches from a variety of fields may be interested in the capture of this material. Researchers interested in topics including play, communications, marketing, experiences of the ever-changing video game environment, socio-computational history/interactions, politics in media, and digital art may find content of interest in a collection documenting public change information. Skold's (2016) "expanded notion" of archiving video game materials has been addressed in literature about researching video games and their paratexts by Karcher (2021). Materials that capture participatory discourses and the dynamic nature of video games is of-interest to support the general body of research material on video games. Further, publicly posted materials are at high risk of loss if the distribution platform where they are hosted is lost, if the platform changes its features and strips back communication features, if a game is removed, and so on. To ensure access for researchers in the future, change information should be considered for collection now,

so that what they "say" about current dynamics, discourses, and how players and developers alike experience games in the modern PC gaming environment.

## The *value* of change information

This project suggest four general forms of informational value found in publicly posted change information documentation: technical information, developmental process information, creative process information, and *context* information. The content of collected material will ideally demonstrate one or more of these characteristics. In the more general sense, the criteria for a material of-interest to this project are: publicly-posted content by developers intended to communicate information about the video game or video game making/fixing/updating process with the community. However, the potential informational value provided by these records also serve as "whys" of this project. These concepts of value shape appraisal criteria and methods for collection. The following section will discuss these four forms of informational value and provide samples of some ideal "change information" documents.

### *Technical information*

The depth of technical specificity of public-facing change information varies. *Figure 1*, for example, demonstrates some technical information of-use to users who act as modders. It is also worth noting that SteamDB captures and reports on granular technical changes scraped from Steam's database, such as file changes and manifest file information (see *Figure 2*). This content *may* be of-interest for collection, but more likely falls outside of the reasonable scope of this collection. It is relevant in that it tracks change, but it tells us very little about the actual information that the developers prepared and posted with the intent of communicating to players. *Figure 2* is a SteamDB display, which is a third-party program. This information was not necessarily intended to be packaged with change information written and posted by a developer

on their game's page (though it is technically publicly viewable data/metadata in Steam's case). Technical detail is not the primary emphasis of this collection, but this collection could correspond with and support other types of technical documentation along these lines that are outside of this project's scope. It is beneficial to be aware of *what* goes into a "game update" before attempting to capture how it has changed.

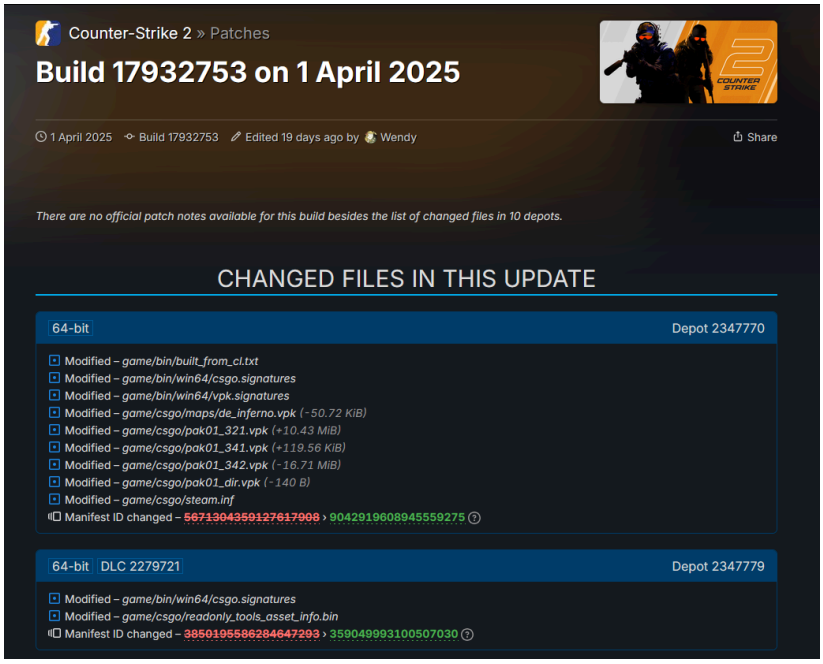


*Figure 2*. Screenshot of a "changed files" page for Counter Strike on SteamDB, captured 4/19/2025. Link: https://steamdb.info/patchnotes/17932753/

***Creative process information***

Developers use communication tools like update feeds or news areas to record and share parts of their creative processes. *Figure 3* shows a section of a blog-like update for the game *Arctic Eggs*, where the developer has narrated their own work and creative process. In this sense, change and update information is a site for sharing and discussing video games as a non-static artistic medium. Updates with this kind of information may include concept art images, videos of development processes, and many other forms of commentary.

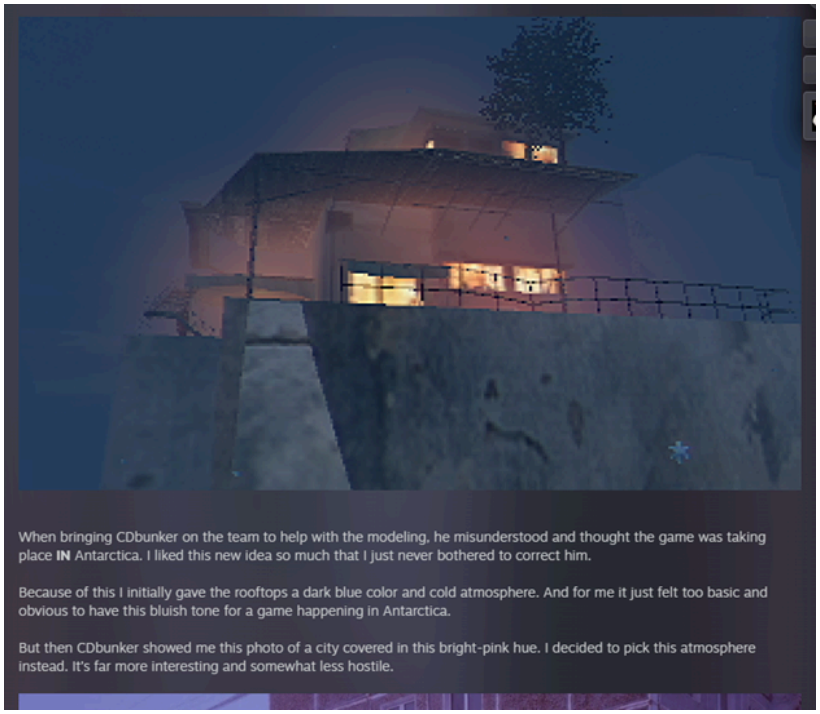


*Figure 3*. Screenshot of a section of a "news" post for *Arctic Eggs*, posted Oct. 28, 2024 on *Arctic Eggs*'s Steam activity feed.

***Developmental process information***

Closely related to creative process, many developers discuss their general developmental processes in creating their games through communication tools like update feeds. The game *Dwarf Fortress*, for example, was original released in 2008. It has since been treated with a rerelease that expanded its graphical display, among other things. The developers have put significant effort into explaining this process to players and pinpointing what they've changed in their updates over the years. This type of informational value frequently intersects and overlaps with artistic process information, but focuses on questions like "what was the game, what is it now, and what will it be?" This is an area where *player feedback* may , as developers react to, acknowledge, and incorporate player criticisms, comments, or concerns about the game in question. This kind of record would be enriched by a collection of discourses generated by

players (such as on Reddit; also see *Figures 5* and *6*), but that is outside of the direct scope of this project.

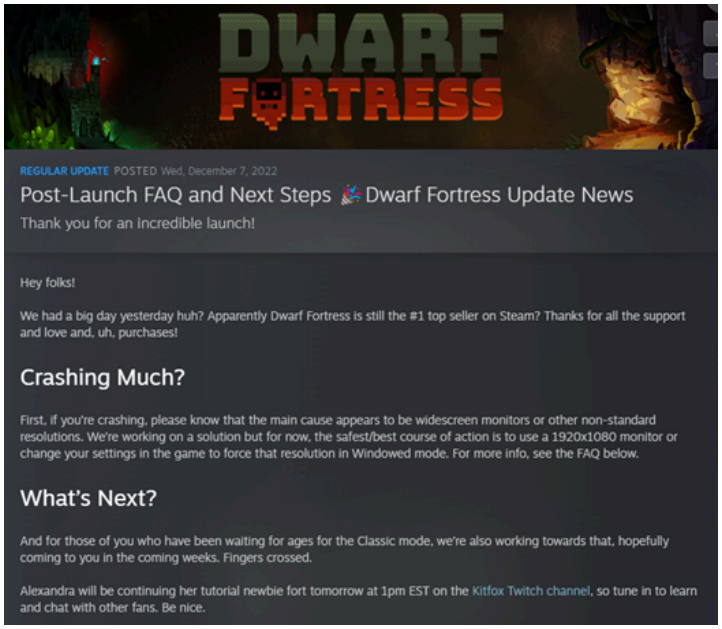


*Figure 4.* Screenshot of a section of a "regular update" post for *Dwarf Fortress*, posted Dec. 7, 2022 on *Dwarf Fortress*'s Steam activity feed.

***Context information***

This project is concerned with two ideas of "context." Change information is, in a sense, a type of metadata about the video game object. It provides context about what a game is, what it was, and what plans the developers might have looking toward the future--not the game itself, but existing as a peripheral part. By collecting this information and situating it alongside the game object and other related materials, it becomes a form of data in its own right (i.e., on game-making processes, on the dynamism of video games, or on how information about video games is communicated). That is one form of *context* that this project addresses.

"Context" can also refer to information reflecting the political, social, societal, etc. context in which the game was created and exists. It is in the interest of this project to collect

dynamic interaction between the game object, the game community, developers as creators/stakeholders, and the world that every single game community action occurs in. "Video game culture" has had an ever-present relationship with sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. since its inception, exemplified by the misogynist harassment campaign GamerGate (Ruberg, 2017; Colby et al., 2021). As an example of this reality in change information, *Figure 5* and *6* show an example of divergent actions in an ongoing debate about how player-character "body type" options are labelled in character creators. *Lords of the Fallen*'s developers began with neutral body type names (e.g., "A" and "B"), but later changed the language "in response to recent community feedback." *Baldur's Gate 3*'s character creator, by contrast, gives the player a remarkable level of control in deciding "body type," specific features, and pronoun choice. The developers' approaches to this topic are stated plainly through their communications about their decisions in update formats. This context-setting is a part of collecting communication materials.

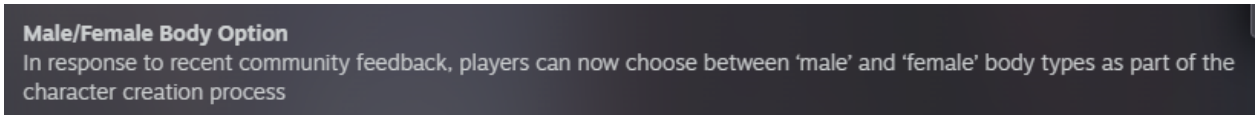


*Figure 5.* Screenshot of a section of a "regular update" post for *Lords of the Fallen*, posted Jan. 23, 2025 on *Lords of the Fallen*'s Steam activity feed.

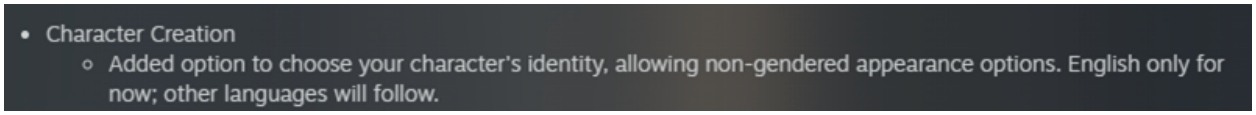


*Figure 6.* Screenshot of a section of a "major update" post for *Baldur's Gate 3*, posted Dec. 14, 2022 on *Baldur's Gate 3*'s Steam activity feed.

This project resists a sole, hegemonic idea of a game developer or game community. It is critical to the collection process to understand that developers themselves are actors from diverse

backgrounds, with diverse perspectives and concerns. There is no singular video game community, and there is no singular type of developer. Colby et al. (2021) state,

> Beyond the gamer interacting with the game, players are culturally situated to be ethical agents *and* actors connected by games that have been designed (by developers made of a few or a few hundred people) to enact particular ethical experiences and also *respond to* players as ethical agents *and* actors. These developers *also* operate within an ethical ecosystem of the larger gaming community, one which *also* serves as agent *and* actor. (pg. 4)

This view is useful for demystifying "the player," "the developer," the "video game community," their relationships, and their various hegemonized images. In other words, racism, misogyny, or transphobia (etc.) exist in video game spaces; however, these spaces are also inhabited by people of color, women, and transgender people (and etc.) who also participate, contribute, and create. It is important to simultaneously acknowledge socio-political reality and marginality, and to resist a dominant narrative that sidelines or derides the very real presence of "everyone else" (this line of thinking is informed by: Zinn, 1977; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Ruberg, 2017; and Colby et al., 2021, among others). Game players, game creators, and everyone in between are ethical agents and actors, and communication documents like published change information observe how each party relates to and interacts with the others. The collection proposed in this paper is not "neutral" or "unbiased." Rather, it embraces the necessity of approaching and collecting video game-related materials with their full socio-cultural context in mind. This project emphasizes socio-political context because these socio-political realities are an inherent part of the video game object, their development, and all of the discourses that surround them.

Any, some, or all of these forms of informational value may be present in a given instance of publicly posted change information. They form the base justification and guide for including this particular kind of material as a part of the archival body about video games. Ideal materials will reflect some or all of these dimensions and are the focus of appraisal criteria.

## Methods for collecting change information

For this project, "appraisal criteria" is tied closely to the method of collection. The following section will discuss digital distribution programs and offer two approaches for capturing change: scraping as a method and participatory archiving.

This project targets three digital distribution platforms of interest (though this scope can be reduced or expanded): Steam, GOG, and itch.io. Each of these platforms allow player to purchase, download, and access video games (or other software) on their PC. They are intermediaries between the developer/publisher, the product, and the player. As discussed throughout this paper, video game developers regularly use these platforms to post and communicate change information to the public. This is the information that this project is interested in, so this project must recognize the part that digital distribution platforms play in the general video game ecosystem. It should be noted that there are other digital distribution platforms, and that some developers post their change information on other blogs or sites. The three targeted platforms are *not exhaustive*. However, they were chosen because they are a start to recording a variety of perspectives on how developers of PC games communicate with and update their communities. Steam is a core of the current PC gaming environment, and houses extensive update information on video games of all kinds. itch.io is an important platform for the self-publishing/indie video game ecosystem. GOG is involved with video game preservation and contains unique information on the preservation, stabilization, and accessibility of old video

games at high risk of obsolescence or loss. The hope is that synthesizing information from the three sources would offer greater insight into who developers are and how they communicate with the community about their processes.

Scraping (or capturing, or crawling) websites, forums, and similar online materials is a method for collection discussed by Colby (2021) and Prom and Swain (2007). This perspective is also informed by the SteamDB project, which captures and displays Steam data as a third-party website not affiliated with Steam itself. SteamDB, for example, does not permit scraping *its* site for academic purposes; the creators state "we do not offer direct data access or dumps. Being given access will still require manual scraping on your part" (SteamDB, n.d.). Instead, they share where and how this data was collected from Steam for their site, and encourage uses with academic interests to "please check if you can get data directly from Steam using SteamKit or by parsing store pages." (SteamDB, n.d.). It is technically possible to capture change information from Steam (including patch notes, news feeds, and developer-posted updates), because SteamDB does precisely that. *However*, capturing and preserving this information may be legally distinct from display. To be clear, all material of-interest to this project is already publicly posted and openly viewable; however, harvesting this material in total from Steam for archival purposes may pose copyright/IP dilemmas (Prom & Swain; Karcher, 2021, discusses some of the specific ethical and legal concerns with data mining). Appraisal and description would also have to take into account the amount of data captured. A lump sum of all change information from a "data dump" may produce records that are wildly out of scope (as discussed in the technical information section above). Additionally, SteamDB works because it is dynamic. Archiving a sliver of this data (i.e., targeting change information) will have to target specific areas of interest that satisfy the scope and appraisal criteria discussed. If the resulting

collection is not capable of being dynamic, it must be determined how often data should be collected or updated.

The pros of this approach include: the amount of "documents" on change information that are capturable; potential to communicate and work with existing archival or semi-archival projects like the SteamDB developers. The cons include: necessity for legal council before initiating the project; technical demand (i.e., participant/s who can facilitate collection and create a useful display of captured data); limits scope to digital distribution programs that have features like SteamKit.

Another option in this vein is webpage capture through tools like the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (also discussed by Prom & Swain, 2007). This is a potential fit for capturing change information on itch.io or GOG as digital platforms because of their web availability, but demands more input and selection. In this case, it may be necessary for the individuals executing the collection/scraping process to sort, weed, and decide on pages to target for capture (i.e., which demonstrate technical, artistic, developmental, or contextual value).

Participatory archiving is the second style of collection that could fit this project. This view is informed by the work of Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) on multicultural participatory archives, Karcher (2021) on ethics and participatory video game archives, and Caswell and Mallick (2014) on "collecting the easily missed stories" and participatory microhistories. Technical complexity and copyright/IP concerns aside, the database or scraping view of collection sidelines developers. Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) state that "archival practices of arrangement and description that focus on document creators and context of creation can be particularly useful when considering empowered preservation. Traditional archival arrangement and description have the potential to accurately represent creators and make community

knowledge architectures explicit, because they privilege document creators and their use of records over the use of the material by others." (pg. 94). This perspective is of great interest to this project, to address a) the existing practices of archival and semi-archival activities in video game enthusiast spaces, and b) the multifaceted realities and identities of developers and players alike (as discussed in the context information section above).

As discussed by Bachell and Barr (2014), there is evidence that developers already save some change information about their games in their development process. This project suggests an approach that would *invite* developers to engage and collaborate with archivists. The resulting collection would provide a form of repository for paratextual change information for the developers, and ensure an open access archive for use by any interested party. This could widen the scope and forms of change information materials beyond solely public communications, and potentially make room for collecting actual legacy video game versions. These are materials about change that might be inaccessible without the support, consent, and collaboration of developers themselves.

Manning (2017) advocates for a participatory approach, pointing out that "a participatory archive for gaming would give voice to those often underrepresented in the industry. For example, small studio, individually designed (independent), narrowcast, and experimental games might be better represented if their designers could contribute" (pg. 287). As such, this approach would start with small studio and independent developers. Materials from any developer are welcome, but this allows the archivist to connect to the voices of "those often underrepresented in the industry." There are some limits to this approach as well. Voluntary contribution does not necessarily capture the widest or most complete body of representative records. In fact, this project suggests that a participatory archives on change information would focus on indie

developers, similar to Bachell and Barr's approach. Further, the body of records produced will favor games whose developers have the time and desire to spare for archival work.

The pros of this approach include: emphasis on developer input; potential for collecting yet-unseen insights or materials from developers themselves; alleviates copyright, access, and display concerns by clearly stating expectations of open access from the beginning. The cons of this approach include: more limited scope; contingent on developer engagement.

Ideally, these two methods of collection can work together in a complementary fashion, supporting each other and making up for each's weaknesses. SteamDB, for example, clearly displays the breadth and depth of capturable change information through data collection methods. And on the other hand, participatory approaches alleviate concerns about leaving developers out of the collection process by inviting them to share their experiences with development on their own terms. Either approach implies considerable engagement with developers, enthusiasts, and creators of semi-archival tools like SteamDB. In a very optimistic view of this project's potential, archivists can connect developers to archival tools and resources, engage with existing archival and semi-archival activities, and contribute to the general publicly-accessible body of video game archives.

**Reflection notes**

I learned a lot about a topic that I already cared about over the course of this project. Doing this work--communicating with peers, reading relevant research/literature, looking at the artifacts of interest, synthesizing information into a coherent whole--has stretched my thinking about what video games are, how they are experienced, *and* how they can be captured and preserved. In particular, I had not thought critically about the nature of change and evolution of video games and of the way we experience games. How I played games as a child in the 2000s is

distinct from how I experience them now, but I am not sure if this kind of change is targeted comprehensively in existing video game archives. It was also interest to look for novel materials to discuss. Looking at the literature was helpful in this sense, as much of the preserved material that I'm familiar with is more along the lines of physical artifacts, source code, or the games themselves. As I talked about this project with peers (some of them archivists, some of them game enthusiasts), the scope, concept, and justifications for this project sort of unfurled before me. There was plenty of great work on video game archiving in the literature that I needed to leave out of this paper, but hopefully I have coherently pulled together some of those ideas in-context with one another.

I spent a lot of time with this project thinking through problems surrounding copyright, participation, value added through archival collection, and the ethical dimensions of different collection approaches (especially scraping). I am aware that I have limited practical understanding of copyright restrictions and how it relates to preservation and display. This project proved that as I grappled with a lot of questions like "wait, who owns this information? Are we allowed to collect and display that?" I suspect that navigating the world of copyright/IP in video games and video game paratextual documentation would require some degree of legal council in reality. And, in viewing existing "collections" like SteamDB, I found myself wondering about collection redundancies. Is it redundant to collect this change information material when it's already present in SteamDB or Steam itself? What value is added through archival collection that is not already evident in these existing sources? Though I don't have definitive answers to these questions, this was a fascinating thought exercise to work through and apply to a theoretical collection.

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