

# REMEMBERING & EXHIBITING GAMES PAST: THE POPULAR MEMORY ARCHIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The Popular Memory Archive is an online collaborative research portal for collecting and exhibiting the production and reception of Australian and New Zealand micro-computer games of the 1980s. Proposed as a resource for both historians of technology and media and the public, the site provides the means to collect and share the memories of those who lived and played their way through this period. We survey activity on the site and offer some preliminary evaluation of the significance of the online contributions. From this, we consider the discursive, inclusive and questioning practices of the portal as a means of exhibiting historic games.

## Keywords

Games History, Digital Heritage, Games Preservation, Videogames, Fan Culture, Online Communities, Museums, Curation

## INTRODUCTION

*Play It Again* is a game history and preservation project focused on locally-written digital games in 1980s Australia and New Zealand. In October 2013 we launched the *Popular Memory Archive* (PMA), an online collaborative research portal. The portal provides a way to disseminate some of the team's research, but importantly also, it provides a mechanism for collecting information, resources and memories from the public about

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1980s computer games. The PMA begins from the premise that in the 1980s games were often the first point of contact with micro-computers, and that in researching the reception of 1980s digital games, the memories of players are key. The ambitions of the PMA are to build resources for historians of technology and media, as well as the interested public, for this significant moment in computing history. The site provides the means to collect and share the memories of those who lived and played their way through this period.

The site features approximately fifty games selected from the 900 + locally-written titles from the 1980s documented by the team's research. These works were chosen to support curatorial themes relating to the history of local games and the challenges of their preservation. These include: the work of pioneering companies such as Beam Software; the rise of the home coder; local scenes and local themes; legal issues for game archivists; and a focus on the collector. This paper surveys the activity of the PMA over the eight months since it went live. We reflect on the expectations of the project and discuss the significance of the online contributions received. This includes some preliminary evaluation of how the PMA attracts invested communities to contribute to the archive and compares this ambition to the work and motivation of online fan communities.

The *Popular Memory Archive* is also conceived as a form of exhibition. Addressing Henry Lowood's question as whether videogames are artefacts or activity we reflect on the exhibition of videogames and games culture by the museum. Briefly comparing the PMA structure and curatorial narratives to those of recent exhibitions - *Games Masters* (ACMI) and *The Arts of Games* (The Smithsonian) - we argue they occupy distinct curatorial territories. We propose that online exhibitions -- such as the PMA and MoMA's online curatorial project *Design and Violence* -- are able to support more discursive, inclusive and questioning practice than conventional museum displays. The PMA utilises the possibilities of online space to develop an approach which addresses and honours games' dual natures as both text *and* performance.

## BIO

**Helen Stuckey** has been actively involved in game culture and game history, fostering a broader international cultural profile for games and participating in many capacities in international gaming. She was the Games Curator at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image where she produced and curated the Games Lab, a space dedicated to addressing the significant contribution to screen culture of video and computer games, and a permanent exhibition space dedicated to exploring game culture. She was the Director of the Games Program in the School of Media and Communications at RMIT University. Currently Helen is completing her PhD on 'The Early History of the Australian Games Industry' at Flinders University.

**Melanie Swalwell** is a scholar of digital media arts, cultures, and histories, and she has been researching local histories of digital games and software in Australia and New Zealand since 2004. Her work has been published in *Convergence*, *Vectors*, the *Journal of Visual Culture*, and *Media International Australia*. Her co-edited anthology, *The Pleasures of Computer Games: Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*, was published in 2008 (McFarland). She is currently Project Leader of the multi-disciplinary Linkage Project "Play It Again", which is concerned with the history and preservation of digital games from 1980s Australia and New Zealand. Melanie is an Associate Professor in the Screen and Media Department at Flinders University.

**Angela Ndalianis** is Professor in Screen Studies at Melbourne University. Her research focuses on entertainment, media histories and the convergence of films, video games, television, comic books and theme parks. Her current research explores the intersection of entertainment culture and robotics. Her publications include *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004), *Science Fiction Experiences* (2010), *The Horror Sensorium; Media and the Senses* (2012) and *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (editor, 2008). She has published numerous essays in refereed journals and anthologies, and is editor of the refereed journals *Refractory: a Journal of Entertainment Media and Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*.

**Denise de Vries** Dr Denise de Vries has, since the early 1980s, developed commercial complex database systems on a variety of platforms from mainframes to a range of personal computers. She is currently a lecturer of computer science in the School of Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics at Flinders University. Denise's current research is on techniques to preserve digital history and data semantics including techniques to deal with changes to information in a database such as structural change, semantic change and constraint change. She is a Chief Investigator of the multi-disciplinary Linkage project "Play It Again" and developed the "Australasian Heritage Software Database" which is co-managed with Melanie Swalwell.

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