

Transience of Place: Knowing, Forgetting, and Playing

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INTRODUCTION

When knowledge and experience are irretrievably lost, we see huge emotional reactions. Communities online came together to mourn the loss of Notre Dame when it burned down in 2019. The burning of the Library of Alexandria (or the popular conception of it) is still a source of grief and regret for many people. And of course, in more recent news, the devolution of Twitter has disrupted many communities, who must now negotiate the process of moving entire group networks over to new social media platforms. On a more personal and common note, returning to a familiar town after a long absence can bring a profound feeling of displacement, and each successive generation is bombarded with concern from generations that came before that once-common experiences are dying out or becoming rare.

Artists and researchers have grappled with issues of transience, recording and community in many ways (Boldrick, 2015, p.4; Kernbauer, 2017, p. 85). Of particular interest to this project is the ways that games and game scholarship have grappled with those issues.

Communities have a range of ways to transmit and preserve knowledge. This is especially true in presumptive (Ritzer, 2014, p. 3) cultures, such as fandoms. Henry Jenkins partially defines a participatory culture by its having an “informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 6). The ways that Jenkins describes this passing along echoes Williams’s comments about the ways that subcultures “can be seen as bricoleurs inasmuch as they rearrange the symbolic meanings attached to mainstream cultural objects” (Williams, 2011, p. 74): as Jenkins says, “Art does not emerge out of whole cloth from individual imaginations. Rather, it emerges through the artist’s engagement with previous cultural materials” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 55). Put another way: art, and the presumptive act of participating in artistic culture, is one of the ways that groups and subcultures meaning-make (Bogost, 2007, p. 118; Vossen, 2021, p. 128), and how they negotiate their group aesthetics, values and histories. These actions can create folk histories and group knowledges recorded in ways outside what are traditionally thought of as ‘histories’ -- that is, written, recorded histories stored in libraries, or primary source histories stored in museums.

Games are also fertile ground for exploring ideas of transience and forgetting. Recent Australian and South East Asian independent tabletops have addressed these topics: such as Sid Icarus’s *Decaying Orbit*, about piecing together the history of a crashing spaceship, Dr Melody Watson’s *On Mighty Wheels*, about families constructing their pasts as performance pieces for other families in the wake of the October Revolution, and Aaron Lim’s *An Altogether Different River*, about returning to an old town and documenting the ways it has changed. Famous video games have also grappled with these topics, for example, *Before I Forget* and *Ether One*, which deal with themes of

forgetting and dementia. Games like these draw out the experience of forgetting and transience through visual metaphor (such as the disappearing scenery in *Ether One*), as well as through more traditional narrative framing (such as the explicit specification in *On Mighty Wheels* that the players not adhere strictly to the real events of the October Revolution, since their characters can be assumed to be embellishing the tale), and through the mechanics that the player uses to engage with the narrative (such as the random card drawing in *Decaying Orbit* that dictates what kind of stories and memories the players create).

Games are in many ways uniquely placed to explore these themes. The nature of games is that they invite the players into their worlds. As Bernard DeKovacs wrote in *The Infinite Playground*, “Play means presence, but not just presence ... a willingness to let go and become part of something new” (DeKovacs, 2020, p. 22). However, in addition, they also invite engagement with their themes through the communities that spring up around them. These can take very similar forms to the fandoms that Jenkins discusses, but the presence of mechanics also open up other methods of engagement with games, such as speedrunning communities and modding communities (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017, p. 182). These communities are not only presumptive, adding expansions and reinterpretations to the text, they can fundamentally reinterpret what it is to engage with the text itself -- for example, a *Breath of the Wild* speedrunner, as joked in a popular Internet post experiences a *Legend of Zelda* story where Link “wakes up butt-ass naked in a cave and legs it to the castle and kicks ganon’s (sic) ass apart in under an hour with a sword he found along the way” (Catsi, 2020).

This creative practice thesis aims to join both those research and creative communities, and specifically to focus on the knowledge loss associated with location and experience, not merely the loss of physical objects. It will explore themes of loss — how are people affected by the loss, real or simulated, of familiar physical places? — of folk knowledge — how do people attempt to preserve and record experiences outside traditional structures, and with access to spaces like the Internet?— and the interplay of physical and virtual common spaces — how do people feel about and interact with digital common spaces differently to, or the same as, physical ones? It will also explore ideas of meaning-making in these communities, and the ways they choose to prosume and meaning-make with the tools and ideas given to them during the course of the project.

The project will be framed as a series of exhibitions and performances, virtual and physical, framed as the activities of a fictional museum interested in alternative ways of expressing and recording history. The museum will have its own social media and community spaces that people can interact with and visit. The museum itself will both host games and be a game space: I have created an online space in Gather.town where the players can create avatars and wander the museum, which will have a fictional history to discover and interactive activities running. At the end of the project, however, most of the social media of the museum will be deleted, leaving the groups that formed around these social media to recreate (or not recreate) their communities and experiences as they choose.

Most of the data will be collected through these social media spaces, with feedback from the events and observing visitors, observing any attempts to recreate the networks gained or the knowledge that was contained in the deleted social media spaces, and also through interviews from volunteer participants.

The ultimate purpose of this research is to provide a springboard for future thought, both research and further creative practice, exploring issues of recording and preservation of knowledge, the ways that people store and access knowledge in their environments, and the value that people place on the durability of art and experience.

BIO

Lee Cope is a PhD candidate at RMIT, studying urban play, game design, and crossmedia games. They have volunteered for the past three years with the Australian Roleplay Community, running game jams for independent TTRPG designers, and helping to organise TTRPG conventions. Their academic background is in linguistics and genre theory, and they have a work background in policy analysis, risk-based regulation and behavioural economics.

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