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BORN DIGITAL PRESERVATION AND THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Emily Ann Pilat

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Emily Pilat
(digital signature)

04/29/16

Born Digital Preservation and the Power of Nostalgia

Emily Pilat

Down in the basement, not far away from the family computer, is a stack of CD-ROMs that totals up to a graveyard of games. My brother and I spent countless hours playing games like “Madeline’s Rainy Day”, “Cro-Mag Rally”, “Bugdom”, “KidPix”, “Tonka Construction”, “Fisher-Price’s Time to Play Dollhouse”, and any and all installments in the “Backyard Sports” series. We’d play pretend through the small screen in front of us, making believe we were coaching a little league soccer team, racing as a cave man through a prehistoric labyrinth, or guiding a small bug on a mission to save ladybugs. These games were a cornerstone of our childhoods. But that bedrock for us cannot be revisited, not easily anyway because every game that played seamlessly on the iMac 63 did not make the transition to newer iMac models to follow.

It wasn’t all that upsetting of a realization at the time, to find out that our favorite childhood games had been rendered obsolete with one single upgrade. If anything, it had been kind of expected, and we hadn’t touched most of the games we still kept on the shelf for a while. My brother and I had then moved on to the PS2 with a fury, leaving CD-ROMS to fall by the wayside. But now, if I want to experience a game that my brother and I played together on the iMac 63 we have to jump through plenty of hoops to do so.

Emulating classic Mac systems using third-party programs is about the only option I have now to play these games, but who knows how long support for such emulations is going to last. Technology turnover is accelerating at a breakneck pace, leaving a trail of defunct tech in its wake, our CD-ROMs included. Maybe it’s a bit of nostalgia on my part

that has me upset at the idea that I won't be able to easily share these games with future generations, or perhaps it's just my own distain at the current state of technology and the lack of attention for preservation, but something's got to change if we want to be able to have future generations understand our experiences firsthand.

Nostalgia was once thought of as a psychological affliction, coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer. The former affliction was once connected to symptoms including fainting, high fever, indigestion, stomach pain, and death. By the 1850s though, the classification of nostalgia as a particular disease and shifted and began to be seen as a symptom or stage of a pathological process instead. Today, nostalgia is regarded simply as a state of reflection and sentimentality for things past, typically associated with positive personal memories. While nostalgia has been proven directly impact our health as it was once thought to, it certainly make waves when it comes to reproduction and preservation, particularly with regard to older tech.

Today nostalgia is often rooted in memes like "Only 90s kids remember", with tech and notable pop culture from the 90s being continually rehashed by every BuzzFeed listicle known to man. But, there might be a reason for this specific nostalgia, as the technology boom that occurred during the 90s resulted in personal computing access for all. This ease of access and introduction to the internet age is memorable, and now with a constant barrage of technology turn over, maybe it's understandable why users are wistful for the time when accessing new technologies didn't run the risk of immediately becoming obsolete.

In addition to a general longing for the 90s, there are other nostalgia-related phenomena that push back further into long gone decades. One such example of technology specific longing is the rising experience of tech-nostalgia, which is notable for the reproduction of bygone tech using modern day conveniences. John Campopiano explains this longing in his essay “Considering our Tech-Nostalgia”:

“using digital means to preserve or recreate aesthetics generally associated with analog media, and refurbishing outdated hardware such as record players, film projectors, tape decks, instant cameras, old computers, in order to connect with the past.” (Campopiano)

Digital tools allow users today to manipulate their media to be directly tied to aesthetics of the past. I’ll admit, I’ve used plenty of filters to make my Instagram photos feel a bit more like classic Polaroids, and I’ve purchased a few reprints of popular albums in the form of vinyl, even though they were never originally recorded on vinyl in the first place. The retro appeal is comforting, and brings a sense of nostalgia into the present, but to be fair it is in the end a simulation of what was once a physical product. Vintage items appeal in their tangibility, which occasionally feels lacking in our abundant digital lives today.

Maybe it’s the rapid technology turnover that has me, and many just like me clamoring for the known again—wanting to preserve our memories today in a fashion that’s familiar from yesterday. Or perhaps it’s a rippling effect of Skeuomorphism, the concept of constructing objects with modern advancements but under the guise of older but familiar appearances. I know in the very least I feel the effects of Skeuomorphism by way of video games and films that set themselves up in a similar style to their comfortable

retro predecessors. Games like Shovel Knight or Stardew Valley take root and bloom largely due to their traditional retro styled roots in graphics and gameplay. However, these games would not be possible without modern tech to guide their development and production.

All of these flashes back to the past are simply our ways as humans to reproduce and keep alive technology and worlds that we've known in an age that is constantly shifting and changing. There's a kind of irony in reproducing or finding inspiration from outdated technology, instead of simply preserving the original tech. However, these simulated leaps back in time keep obsolete tech fresh in users' minds and can ideally impact appreciation for the outdated. In turn, that appreciation can take lead people to take action to work to preserve the authentic originals. Continuing to stay nostalgic, be it through preservation or recreation, connects us to our past in a positive way. At least in my experience it's caused me to move outside of my reproduction bubble and seek out original vinyl LPs, and Polaroid cameras. Living in Fredericksburg alone will do that though, as the downtown area is somewhat of an antiquing hub. Moving away from recreation and over to preservation Its simply a shift, moving away from romanticizing objects and their histories, and forward to the heavy lifting of preservation.

It was the weekend before finals when I started to feel a gnawing nervousness in my gut—my laptop didn't seem to be working right. Loading a website had suddenly become a struggle that could no longer be chalked up to Wi-Fi speeds, as the rest of the laptop functions (from opening a file, to trying to boot up the smallest document) slugged through

the paces. After a bit of unsuccessful troubleshooting on my own I gave up trying to solve whatever the problem was. In my last act with the laptop, I somehow had the good sense to preserve any and all major files, including a significant work of electronic literature I'd been drafting in Inform7, I would need to succeed through my upcoming final papers and projects, and then turned the device off for the night. The next morning the laptop refused to turn on. It had rendered itself completely useless- no more help than an oversized paperweight for my upcoming exams.

It was a numb sorrow that washed over me next. I couldn't even cry over the loss of data- photos dating all the way back to my time in middle school, music files I'd bonded with my Dad over, and most critically countless illustrations and masses of creative writing that I'd kept private as I built up my confidence to showcase them all. The loss of my laptop rapidly came into focus as a kind of modern day house fire, arguably my biggest fear growing up.

Despite being instructed not to do so, I often imagined as a kid what I would work to save if I found myself in a house fire. My stuffed animals always seemed like a decent choice; they weren't too heavy for me to carry so we could all make it out together. As I got older, priorities changed and my dog became what needed to be saved, then my parents and brother if they were hurt. But I'd never considered what could be my priority to save if my laptop were to go up in flames like it had at the worst possible moment. My fireproof box became a pen drive stuffed with sample essays, exam prep, and an incomplete work of electronic literature, but nothing else that could give someone a sense of who I was like or how I had used my laptop for over the last four years.

I'd only ever witnessed one house fire before, a neighbor up the street found their home engulfed in minutes after a guest had tapped the ashes of their cigarette into the dry mulch up against the house. The entire family ended up camped out on our front lawn, all having fled in the family minivan. The kids were left buckled into car seats while their mom and aunt began to absolutely lose it watching the fire trucks stream up the narrow street to try and save their home. The aunt wailed until her voice gave out, "That's everything, it's all gone! Lost!" as the embers from the house fire sailed up into the air, backed by the thick black smoke of memories dissolving. It seemed like the entire neighborhood all gathered around to watch the distant destruction, gaping at a disaster that could strike anyone. While we all gaped, my neighbor across the street, whose house was located closer to the house fire, began to hose off his front and back lawn. He didn't want the fire to spread to his home; preventative measures were necessary.

My mom, brother and I watched throughout the night the outlines of firefighters stamping out small brushfires in the woods just beyond our house, no more than 100 yards away from my own home. We were all under a similar threat of house fire thanks to the dry woods all around us. I slept dreamlessly that night not even giving a second thought of the risks of fire striking our safety down. It was only in the following days when the ashes had cooled and the neighborhood opened back up to reveal the gaping black hole where a home used to be that I remembered my fear.

I eventually sent my computer in for repairs, and with hope to see if any data could be retrieved. To my surprise, the repair service was able to restore largely every file that had been stored, excluding a few hundred or so song files I'd amassed over the years. The tech who serviced my laptop gave some stern advice when returning my laptop, "get an

external hard drive, that way you don't have to scramble to save everything next time." Because of course, there was going to be a next time. No computer is infallible.

By the winter of that same year I finally followed through on his advice, buying a basic, but accommodating external hard drive to back up my laptop's data. About every ten days that my computer goes without a backup I begin to receive little pop up notifications reminding me how long it's been since my data has been saved externally. The notifications have almost begun to feel like a kind of fire drill, nudging me out the door while I pretend my laptop is doomed once more. Which I guess in the end is helpful; I preserve what's present and move on with my day, secure in knowing that my information is at the very least saved in one additional location.

So long as the external hard drive doesn't catch on fire, I think I'll be okay.

It's reads like a mystery thriller plot: a 3.5" floppy disk containing a powerful work of electronic literature written by a world renowned novelist is programmed to encrypt itself following a single use. No amount of tinkering can restore the used floppy to its original state. The floppy containing the work is showcased at a 1992 meeting held by the Americas Society, which was secretly taped by New York University film students going by the pseudonyms Templar, Rosehammer, and Pseudophred, all wanting to capture the escaping work. This is for a time the only known copy of the work that exists outside of the floppy disk. Then some 20 years later, a University of Toronto PhD student studying cryptography along with a scholarly team with invested interested in the work opened up a contest to decode the work, offering up every published work of the author's (excluding the

hypertext) as a prize. With permission from the publisher, that contest concluded with a winning decoding of the work. From there scholarly research, and application centered on the work was conducted with scans, emulations, and transcriptions rapidly preserving the work to be seen by the world. The work that had existed in death had been restored to life.

And yet, this is not a movie, it is a real work of hypertext titled *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* crafted by William Gibson, along with artist Dennis Ashebaugh. The hypertext was comprised of a 300-line semi-autobiographical poem focused on the nature of memories by Gibson. Ashebaugh's accompanying artist book was designed similarly to Gibson's hypertext, with the intent to gradually fade away words and images following exposure to light. *Agrippa* was an entire project based around digital and physical art decay,

It's the cinematic-worthy fight to preserve *Agrippa*, an electronic literature work that for all intents and purposes did not seem to want to be preserved, which highlights significant issues that are plaguing the electronic literature community in preserving work for future audiences. There is significant worry with regard to e-lit works due to technology turn over, that solutions proposed as a means to preserve are temporary solutions with no longevity.

The manifesto *Acid-Free Bits* is a bold attempt to come up with a standard for protecting electronic, written by Nick Monfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin in 2004. The work outlines several ideal methods for preserving and ensuring electronic literature works will stay alive. Additionally, it highlights the importance of electronic literature as a cultural cornerstone, and why preservation is a worthwhile endeavor. The pair propose several

core principles of preservation for born-digital works, with suggestions such as open systems, community-directed systems, consolidated and validated code with comments, plain text, cross-platform options, and documentation saved and recorded throughout the creation process.

The methods of preserving born-digital works pitched by Monfort and Wardrip-Fruin are indeed no easy task, but it can be done. The most notable author I've seen put into practice the pair's suggested documentation process, which to me is the most daunting in scope rather than technical process, is interactive fiction author Emily Short. With electronic literature works like "Glass", and "Bronze" Short posted a comprehensive documentation of each work, including Inform7 source code of the works, maps outlining areas of play, "Making of..." author process write ups, as well as the full text of each work written in plain text.

It's from Emily Short's resources surrounding two fantasy works that I often gained inspiration and aid when writing my own works of electronic literature. I was able to implement and edit difficult code in Inform7 because Short documented me how she had done the very same. I wanted to emulate her style, and always had her resources available to me in order to consider how Short would approach the problems I was facing when creating my work. This documentation process is valuable not only in preserving the work alone, but in preserving the culture and the life that exists in the electronic literature community. Being able to look into the guts of another author's work and see what went right and what didn't and how to learn from that is an invaluable resource. Such resources will only exist if authors like Short make the time and put in the effort to allow their works to be accessed as easily as possible, which in turn allow for more effective preservation.

I've honestly never known what to save after I finish up a semester of school. I have at least two binders filled with a variety of loose-leaf paper notes, printouts, and an agenda filled on nearly every page with assignments and important dates. My life is bound to paper just as much as it is to technology, and it's my dumb romanticism that consistently weighs my sense of self to these largely insignificant scraps. I like to imagine my children, or even grandchildren, looking back through my things to get a sense of who I was in college, and maybe they can accomplish that best through old discarded assignments, so long as they don't discolor beyond recognition.

But sometimes I wonder too, is it okay to let things fade? I want to say yes, since I often enjoy the simple pleasure of erasing my history forever. Completely clearing out my virtual trashbin is just as enjoyable to me as tossing my paper waste into the dumpster on the weekends. Knowing that I've collected up things and can see them untangle themselves from my life is a kind of freedom that feels good to practice regularly.

At the same time though, I struggle with wanting to record myself at every possible moment. I take too many selfies, record and edit YouTube vlogs, write up personal blog posts, and keep a diary in the margins of my to-do lists. All of these records kept for the ability to look back on who I was in comparison to who I am at some point in the future. I know my mom has an entire bin of all her favorite assignments my brother and I did throughout elementary and middle school. It's all there, neatly organized for my brother and I to access whenever we want. I haven't been through the bin in a good while, and

maybe I should. Then again I might want to trash it all into a dumpster, or I'll find the pull of nostalgia is too strong to allow me to remove any of it from the periphery of my life.

It's a strange push and pull of wanting to discard and move on to something better, and the sensation of clinging on for dear life to what is known and familiar. I want to be present and free from attaching myself in methods and sources that are going to date me, but still this technology today is what identifies me, as much as past technologies have identified my parents and grandparents before them. I have such a paper trail that follows me, it is equal in weight now to the digital footprint I've created.

I wonder, from this focus on preservation and born-digital works, if it's time to finally practice what I've researched here. Currently, I've yet to take any serious action in order to better preserve my born digital works that are live online. My own personal website is about as organized as it gets for my handful of electronic literature works, all of which I've bookmarked in a portfolio. These bookmarks all lead to the various hosting platforms that my works are located within, like Playfic and Philome.la. Stored away in folders on my computer are both the programs I coded my works on, as well as the works themselves. Off the laptop, everything necessary for my works has been backed up on a single external hard drive as well. Beyond what little I've done, I have yet to follow any of Monfort and Wardrip-Fuin's guidelines.

It's hard to gauge how much I want to save these works for the future. Just like I feel about my filled up binders at the end of my semesters, I'm finding myself caught in a push and pull relationship towards preserving my work. I enjoy witnessing them, and seeing their functionality online, but in five or ten years from now will I feel the same? It's hard to

tell if any of my work is real preservation-worthy that needs to be saved beyond my laptop, or just a twinge of future nostalgia getting in my way.

Perhaps if there's a significant outside push, an audience that somehow makes itself known to me, then I'll be inclined to preserve as Monfort and Wardrip-Fruin so passionately urged creators like myself to. Or, better yet, I can allow someone else do the preserving for me like the lovely team behind the Agrippa Files. Until then, I'll keep my electronic literature filed away like my faded old schoolwork.

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