A new way to think about your favorite game's code

It's surprisingly hard to archive a video game. Cartridges decay, eventually; discs become unreadable as their plastic degrades. Source codes are lost to corporate mergers and acquisitions. But what's most dangerous to preserving game history isn't a physical or corporate consideration: it's the prevailing attitude that games are playful, evanescent, and therefore not worth archiving.

Obviously that's not true, and games deserve critical historical consideration, the kind that other, older mediums get. Frank Cifaldi and Kelsey Lewin, co-directors of the Video Game History Foundation, are two of the people leading that charge. I spoke with them a little while ago about preserving video game history, and their new program, the Video Game Source Project, which takes as its footing the idea that there's no better way to study a video game than to access its raw material.

There's only so much you can learn from studying the final product, they say – because studying the final iteration of a creative project leaves out the *hows* and *whys* that brought it to life in the first place. And Lewin and Cifaldi have started with a classic: LucasArts's *The Secret of Monkey Island*, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this month.

"First of all, [the project is] just kind of a call to arms to everyone that this stuff is really important and useful. And, at least when it comes to the older material, is rapidly dying," says Cifaldi, pointing out that most game companies don't have source code archives. "But I think, most importantly, we want to normalize the availability and study of video games source material, because right now, video game source is just a very proprietary trade secret."

Which is true! And in modern gaming, cloning is a big deal, even leaving out the issues with source code. “But from our perspective, it’s like, if you haven’t been doing anything with this game for 10, 20 years, why — why the lockdown?” he says.




A scene from *The Secret of Monkey Island*
Video Game History Foundation

It’s a great question, one that makes me think a lot about the traditional stories of video game archiving — rather, I should say, one story in particular, the one about *E.T.* and the landfill. See, the game *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* was a 1982 adventure game movie tie-in, developed for the Atari in a blazing *36 days.* When it hit store shelves that Christmas, it was an unprecedented flop; Atari buried the unsold inventory somewhere deep in the New Mexico desert, where it was dug up in 2014 by a documentary crew. The next year, the game entered the Smithsonian’s collection, and they produced an episode of a podcast in 2019 to retell the legend.

It’s a wonderful story, especially when you consider Atari’s fortunes in the aftermath. (Spoiler: they weren’t great.) But the problem is, it’s basically the only one people know. Cifaldi and Lewin’s real goal is to bring more fascinating stories about this kind of history to the public, and to preserve the raw materials that make them possible. (The Foundation’s blog is excellent, at least when it comes to great stories.)

This isn’t without controversy. The Nintendo Gigaleak, as it’s been called, happened earlier this summer and exposed a rich trove of new data about classic games. It also exposed a moral dilemma: if the riches in the leak were obtained illegally, as they likely were, does that change how historians think about

and use what they learn from it? That answer is an individual calculus, of course. But on the other hand: if Nintendo's secrets were less closely held, the leak wouldn't be quite as monumental.

I don't know that there's a tidy answer here. What's clear, though, is that historical research into games should be something companies expect and prepare for. The kind of work the Video Game History Foundation does is important and necessary, even if the industry doesn't quite appreciate it. They just want a more open world.

"And just to be clear, I mean, I don't think we expect a world where everyone's just like, 'Great, let's open source everything,'" says Lewin. "It's unrealistic," agrees Cifaldi.

"But what is realistic is normalizing that someone could actually study this, just for historical purposes, that they should be able to look at this and learn things from it and tell the stories that they find within it," Lewin says.

The Secret of Monkey Island is a seminal game, not least for Cifaldi, who cites it as "maybe my favorite game, depending on which day you ask me." He says it taught him what games could be — like that they could have funny, memorable worlds and characters. The Foundation received the game the way they receive a lot of them, which is to say, on the sly. (Cifaldi identifies this as another problem the Foundation is out to solve: making it safe for people to donate games and such to the archive, even if they don't own the rights.)

When they got in touch with Lucasfilm about making content around the game, however, the studio was supportive. "I mean, they're the guys that make *Star Wars*, right, they understand," says Cifaldi. "They understand that fans really enjoy this behind-the-scenes material, and that it directly benefits them if people are talking about it."



Aladdin’s run cycle from *Disney’s Aladdin*
Video Game History Foundation

This month, the Video Game History Foundation plans to reveal what it’s learned about *The Secret of Monkey Island*, to fans, historians, and everyone else who might be interested in the hidden corners of a 30-year-old video game. “We are able to reconstruct deleted scenes from the games that no one’s ever seen before, because that data literally isn’t on the disk that you get, because it’s not compiled into the game,” says Cifaldi. (The Foundation has also gotten Ron Gilbert, the creator of the game, to join them in a livestream happening on October 30th.)

Cifaldi and Lewin’s perspective can be summed up pretty simply: they want to expand the kinds of stories we can tell about video games, as both fans and historians. “We’ve only really had crumbs of games development through, you know, finding an unfinished version that was maybe sent to a magazine to preview, or through seeing what accidentally got compiled into the final game,” says Cifaldi.

That, he says, has tainted how fans view the development process — as something perhaps linear, instead of as a gradual pileup of creative decisions. “I think a really interesting thing to come out of this conversation with Ron is being able to sort of show that when we find this unused character in the source code, it’s not, like, this was a character with a fleshed-out biography,” Cifaldi says. Sometimes an unused pirate is just an unused pirate.

“It kind of sometimes tends to put either false importance on something,” Lewin agrees. “If you only have two clues about something, you can come up with a wild variety of scenarios that those two clues fit into.” If you have 20 or 30 clues, on the other hand, the realm of possibility narrows. “If you saw

it in an earlier build of the game, you might be led to believe that it's something that it absolutely wasn't," Lewin says.

To take a real example from *The Secret of Monkey Island*: the collapsing bridge. As Cifaldi explains it, there are frames of animation for a bridge collapsing in the original artwork for the game, but there's no code that calls for it. It's just there. So they took it to Gilbert, the creator, and asked about it. "Ron's like, 'Oh, yeah, that's not anything that was ever in the game. I'm not really sure why that's there,'" says Cifaldi.

Sometimes an unused pirate is just an unused pirate

They also had access to Gilbert's sketchbook from when he was making the game, which contained the raw ideas that eventually made it into the finished product. "There is a page that just says, 'booby trap on bridge?'. And I think that's like, all it ever was," Cifaldi continues. "Like, the game wasn't designed enough, but artists need to be working on something. So it's like, I don't know, 'work on a booby-trapped bridge, and maybe we'll revisit it,' and they never did." It's not a cut puzzle; it doesn't mean anything other than it was an idea that didn't quite make it.

"That's part of the creative process," Cifaldi says. "You're collaborating, there's a lot of people involved, and you try ideas out, you rough draft them, and then they might get cut before you even try to use them." A collapsing bridge is just a collapsing bridge.

In this — demystifying the game development process — the Video Game History Foundation is something of a pioneer, one that's actively writing the rules for archiving this kind of art as it goes. Its source project is a holistic examination of how the games you love actually get made, which is as important as the games themselves. In our conversation, Cifaldi likened his work to archaeology.

“If you’re able to access raw source code for a game, bare minimum, you can understand how the systems work and talk to each other and things like that,” he says. But if you’re a good historian, it’s a dig. “When you’re looking at a mummy, you don’t have access to that person when they were alive or whatever, right? But you can find clues that help you understand who they were, and what their social status was, and things like that,” he says. And those clues eventually become a story, one we might tell, years later, on a podcast for the Smithsonian.

“It’s just kind of a new idea in the world to have source material for any kind of software in an archive. And I think it’s going to be a rough road ahead,” Cifaldi says. “But this has to start somewhere. And it’s starting now.”

https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/15/21516254/video-game-history-foundation-secret-of-monkey-island-code