Haptic Remembering: Potential Approaches to Speculative and Affective Archives

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To define something–an image, an encounter, a process–as haptic is to let the sensory experience of touch surface. Film and media philosopher Laura U. Marks (2000) describes hapticity with respect to images as a vision like touch writing, "While optical perception privileges the representation power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image" (p. 163). Teddy Pozo and Tina M. Campt apply Mark's work on hapticity to critical analyses of video games and multimedia art, respectively. In video games, Pozo (2018) applies hapticity as "the continuity between affect, tactility, feelings, and being moved in game design" (para. 5). Campt (2021) applies hapticity to formal analyses of multimedia art as, "the labor of feeling across difference and precarity; the work of feeling implicated or affected in ways that create restorative intimacy" (p. 104). Hapticity is about connection, sensory connection to an out of body stimulus. Through synthesis and connection of hapticity to archives or potential archives, I am engaging what Lauren Berlant (2022) would call "to loosen an object" (p. 28). I am looking at archives in an attempt to reconfigure, trouble, or otherwise explore what can be an archive. This discussion on archives looks at the parallels between institutional and cultural archives and video games and addresses how certain video games engage with history and culture. It also describes the limitations of video games as haptic cultural archives by looking at how multimedia art installations concentrate hapticity in archives that are both speculative and affective.

The Potential of Archives

In an attempt to explore and reconfigure the archive, I began where many other archival scholars began in Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995). I am drawn to the passage where Derrida describes his computer, "the little portable Macintosh" (p. 25). Derrida writes:

> I asked myself what is the moment *proper* to the archive, if there is such a thing, the instant of archivization strictly speaking, which is not, and I will come back to this, so-called live or spontaneous memory (mnēmē or anamnēsis), but rather a certain

> hypomnesic and prosthetic experience of the technical substrate. Was it not at this very
> instant that, having written something or other on the screen, the letters remaining as if
> suspended and floating yet at the surface of a liquid element, I pushed a certain key to
> "save" a text undamaged, in a hard and lasting way, to protect marks from being erased,
> so as to ensure in this way salvation and *indemnity*, to stock, to accumulate, and, in what
> is at once the same thing and something else, to make the sentence available in this way
> for printing and for reprinting, for reproduction? (p. 25-26).

I am drawn to this passage of saving the same way I am drawn to video games as an archive, the instantaneity of the save, the availability of the content, the reduction of archival moments because of a nearly infinite ability to archive. Derrida deconstructs the archive by sitting with the fever that accompanies the need to save, to store, to produce, to live forever, and places the archive into the everyday experience of saving a word document on a personal computer. Derrida describes the public record experience through the metaphor of impression where the suspension of liquid text is impressed technologically into a hard save. Derrida surfaces a way to think about archives, archival moments, and the process of public record by describing a single moment that facilitates the motion of a sentence from the private sphere to the public sphere.

Achille Mbembe (2002) explicitly defines archives to theorize how archives function as a technology of power. Mbembe defines archives as follows:

> The term 'archives' first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one
> of the organs of a constituted state. However, by 'archives' is also understood a collection
> of documents - normally written documents - kept in this building. There cannot therefore
> be a definition of 'archives' that does not encompass both the building itself and the
> documents scored there (p. 19).

Read separately, the definitions of archive from these specific passages of Derrida and Mbembe seem to be at odds with each other. Each describes a specific process of archiving. Derrida describes the process of impression, how to take an idea and make it public. Mbembe describes an archive as a building, a symbol of the state, and the collection of written documents within. Reading Derrida and Mbembe together and taking a literal understanding of deconstruction, we can start to see an archival potential form around video games and video game consoles with their seemingly unlimited cloud storage, graphics, and save buttons.

Video Games as Archives

Video games can be and in many ways already act as an archive. Further considering video games with Mbembe's theorizations on archives surfaces multiple points of connection. Thinking about games with their own worldbuilding, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is a fantasy, single player game consisting of its own histories, maps, peoples, politics, ecologies, and more. It is a complete world that consists of in-game documents that describe fragments of that world. A player moving through the game can collect scrolls, letters, and books that provide pieces of the history of Skyrim, the player's history and role within the central quest of the game, and opportunities for character customization and side quest development. The player can either save these collected items in their pack to eventually place in one of their homes or the player can disregard the item, not knowing if it will be relevant in a future quest. In this example, two archives are happening simultaneously. In the process of worldbuilding, the game creators had to make the archive that the player accesses analogous to an institutional archive and the player is making an archive of their character's experience—a cultural archive. Reading the archives introduced through this specific video game example recalls Mbembe's discussion of rituals in that there is a certain level of secrecy to accessing the Skyrim archive; it requires skill to play through the game and find the fragments in addition to having access to the game system, the game itself, and the time to devote to playing (p. 19-20).

Pokémon is another video game that utilizes archives as a crucial element to gameplay culminating in the Pokédex, a taxonomic archive of Pokémon. Always incomplete, the Pokédex requires the player to explore "unexplored" places in the game to find pokémon that are not currently in the index, learn their attributes, and classify them. The more extensive a player's Pokédex, the more advanced the gameplay becomes. Yet, a more complete Pokédex signifies that the gameplay is exhausted and the player will need to start the game over or acquire a new game to play. Although aesthetically and ludically different, both *Skyrim* and *Pokémon* provide examples of video games that engage in archival practices for worldbuilding. In many ways, the archives of these respective games are crucial to the gameplay. Yet in thinking about the archive potential of video games, can video games be a historical archive?

In "Videogames as Public History: Archives Empathy and Affinity" authors Abbie Hartman, Rowan Tulloch, and Helen Young (2021) explore video games as an avenue for public historical discussion. In that:

Videogames offer an important way for large segments of the population to interact with detailed historical content for extended periods of time; a game typically takes longer to play than a film does to watch, a museum to visit or a book to read. Videogames, we argue, are a common form of public history which is only beginning to be explored and understood in scholarship in that field (para. 3).

Hartman et al. identify three concepts that merit an understanding of critical evaluation of historic video games: interactive archive, historical empathy, and affinity space potential, that contribute to "history-making experiences outside play contexts" (para. 4). For a historical video game to act as a haptic archive, it cannot simply use archival material or footage but must include the participation and agency of the player in accessing the archive. Hartman et al. use the archive of historical objects and facts in the video game *Valiant Hearts* as an example of affective interactive archives in that as players navigate the gameplay and pick up objects, they are given a historical account of the object through photos, diary entries, and other primary sources from World War One. Addressing the significant amount of time a player devotes to play a single video game, Hartman et al. link that to a potential for developing sustained historic empathy. They write, "In allowing the player to act as an agent in the recreated past, and in training them into its world, culture and logics, videogames can facilitate the establishment of a potentially nuanced and sustained form of historic empathy" (para. 15). This interaction between player and video game is not perfect nor is it a complete and accurate history. As a cultural archive, a video game that engages with history will more aptly convey the affective structure of a particular cultural moment of significance than a complete and perfect (impossible) factual presentation.

In many ways, this discussion of complete and accurate history with respect to historical video games echoes similar discussions in historical films. In the introduction to *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History,* Kapell and Elliot write, "In video games, as with film, given that it is impossible to show everything, any simulation of the past is of course constructed to a great degree by which facts or details are selected, which leads to new issues" (2013, p. 6). The decisions on what to include in a historical video game, much like in a film, depend on entertainment, plot development, and projected commercial success. The relationship between film and videogames as objects and as potential archives raises two questions: Does the dependence on entertainment, plot development and commercial success limit the archival

potential of video games? How does the relationship between film and video games provide us with the necessary methods to explore video games as archives? Ann Cvetkovich describes film and other similar media as important to the synthesis of cultural archives of feelings. She goes on to describe the role of fantasy or speculation as invaluable to queer documentary film "as a way of creating history from absences" (2003, p. 269-271). I am unaware of a video game that engages with history in a way that constitutes an affective archive or creates history from the absences. *Valiant Hearts*, as an example, engages with history in a way that populates its gaming archive of stuff and generates storylines. It functions as an archive. Other video games that engage with history, like the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, seem to echo that engagement. Yet, video games have the potential to contribute more to historical and cultural archives through their particular hapticity.

Haptic duality in video games is a convergence of affective and effective definitions. "Affective" is the multi-sensory, emotional response of being moved that connects the player to the gameplay and "effective" is the technologically created sensations of touch like through a rumble pack or other wearable. Yet, hapticity and the potential for video games to act as a haptic archive is slightly more than the summation of affective and effective definitions. Campt (2021) expands:

> Hapticity is, in this sense, the labor of feeling beyond the security of one's own situation. It involves cultivating an ability to confront the precarity of less valued or actively devalued individuals without guarantees, and working to sustain a relationship to those imperiled and precarious bodies nonetheless. (p. 104)

Understanding video games and specifically historical video games through Campt's haptic framework is to understand that in playing a video game, a player is also confronted with images that have the potential to push them into feelings beyond themselves. Although video games have the potential to act as archives in speculative worlds as well as archives grounded in historical realities, multimedia art installations engage in hapticity without having it as part of the very mechanics of their spectatorship, unlike a game. Can understanding the hapticity of multimedia art as it engages in history enhance the fantasy and overall potential of video games as an archive?

Multimedia Art as Archives

Video games as an archive of how to be moved or to participate in history. By distilling video games to a fundamental level of active participation in images, we can describe additional approaches to archives and public history that are haptic and potentially develop video games as significant archives. Laura U. Marks (2000) further describes the haptic image as:

> [connecting] directly to sense perception, while bypassing the sensory-motor schema. A sensuous engagement with a tactile or, for example, olfactory image is pure affection, prior to any extension into movement. Such an image may then be bound into the sensory-motor schema, but it need not be. The affection-image, then, can bring us to the direct experience of time through the body. (p. 163)

The liminal aesthetic experience of interactive installations and temporally folding photographic experience in this section asks the visitor to participate haptically in histories that are in many ways parallel to historical video games in the previous section. There is an intentional blurring of history and present, self and others, and remembering and speculation that foreground the experiences of memory and archiving by asking the visitor to participate intimately in multi-sensory remembering.

In *A Black Gaze,* Tina M. Campt's (2021) surfaces and thinks with hapticity as a way to describe how the viewer participates with art in a way that is beyond empathy. Campt discusses two installations from her assembled cultural archive that interact with history in a speculative and affective manner: Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born's active movement piece titled *Sitting on a Man's Head* in the 2018 Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (p. 112-121). This piece is intended to have people interact with it both as performance to watch and as visitors to the installation with instructions. *Sitting on a Man's Head* refers to the practice and protest of Igbo women in eastern Nigeria where "sitting on a man" is a way a community of women can call attention to the offenses done by a man (p. 115). In 1929, Nigerian women "sat on " warrant chief Okugo to force his resignation, an example of women's diplomatic power in Igboland (Uchendu & Okonkwo, 2021, 247). Through Campt's viewing, *Sitting on a Man's Head* provides a link to historically significant actions, it encourages visitors to embody difficult and liminal feelings, but does not provide limits of specificity or define how and if a visitor should participate in the process of remembering.

The second installation that Campt discusses is Simone Leigh's show "Loophole of Retreat " installed April 19- August 4, 2019, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that

includes sound installations, sculpture, and film (p. 145-158). This showing was partly based on the 1861 writings of Harriet Jacobs and her struggles to escape enslavement, specifically Jacob's experience of seven-years hiding in an attic crawl space (p. 146). Campt writes extensively about the sound installation of Leigh's show, *Loophole of Retreat I*. This sound installation by Simone Leigh and Moor Mother is intended to remember what it might have sounded like during the three days that Debbie Sims Africa and her community hid the birth of her child while she was incarcerated in 1978 (p. 149-150). It is the speculation of the noise it would take to conceal a baby from prison authorities in a confined and heavily surveilled space and the process of experience of that sound in a space with overwhelming visuals of captivity and freedom that like the previous installation create a haptic and multisensory historical experience. Beyond empathy, the affective experience of Simone Leigh's installation is a participatory history that is not concerned with comfortable history but an approach to archiving a particular collection of complex feelings and labor.

Thinking with Campt to other haptic visual projects that do the work of an archive, Kajri Jain's (2021) essay, "Go Away Closer: Photography, Intermediality, Unevenness," discusses photographer Dayanita Singh's particular oeuvre. Although Jain's argument is centered on Singh's ability to trouble the relationship between capitalism and photographic practices, Jain also acknowledges Singh's reorientation of archival practices (p. 104 - 105). Jain describes Singh's *Museum Bhavan*:

> The Museum Bhavan book follows from the Museum Bhavan show (Hayward Gallery, 2013), comprising a set of nine self-contained mobile museums, each a wooden structure containing an archive of images with frames to exhibit the images on their surfaces as well as in smaller modular structures, enabling multiple constantly changing displays. (p. 105)

This description of Singh's work as a collection of mobile museums that visitors can move, look through, and participate in contains moments and photographs from not only Singh's oeuvre but her life as well. The "Museum Bhavan Walkthrough" describes this merging of memories within *The Museum of Little Ladies* that also has photographs of Singh taken by her mother at moments that the artist wanted to archive and merge with her own work (Spontaneous Books, 2016). Jain (2021) identifies that Singh's artwork foregrounds the personal, the memorial, the domestic and with that is also an archive of social relations (p. 112-113). Dayanita Singh creates movable

museums that seek to reclaim archival space for everyday objects and realities that would otherwise not be remembered because of their relationship to the domestic sphere as opposed to the political sphere of institutional archives.

Another example of speculative and affective approaches to archives is introduced in Nicole Erin Morse's *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* (2022). Morse describes the speculative approach the multi-media artist Vivek Shraya applies to her own family archives, writing, "Undoing the ties that bind the present to the past and constrain the future, the trans artist Vivek Shraya uses self-portraiture to open her family's diasporic South Asian history to other narratives, other trajectories, and even other family members" (p. 123-124). Morse continues to describe Shraya's project *Trisha* as an intervention in her family's history, a bending of time, and a production of a speculative archive (p. 124). Shraya does this by recreating photographs of her mother and placing them side by side in a folding archive of past and present. For Morse, the significance of this project is in the self-knowledge developed by Shraya by creating this project and the participation in the creation of self through a haptic understanding of the past (p. 130-131). As method, Shraya's project of creating a speculative archive through the recreation of an image in conversation with the original image enhances the affective aesthetics of the archive, and ultimately addresses what is absent in the past from the present. Shraya (2016) writes in one sentence that merges past and present within herself and within the project, "You used to say that if you had a girl, you would have named her Trisha." This sentence summarizes the archive and the archivist's relationship to it.

Hapticity is fundamentally about connecting the self to an object. Thinking with Lauren Berlant, the goal of this discussion was to loosen the archive by thinking through the hapticity of video game and multimedia art projects that engage with history and archives. By looking at parallels between institutional and cultural archives and video games, I identified how video games are and can be fantastical and historical archives. I also addressed some of the surfacing limitations and complexities of hapticity in historical video games and their archival nature. Ultimately, this discussion introduces the superficial stuff and primary entertainment purpose of video games archives–even though video games are haptic by design–and foregrounds how hapticity in visual images and multimedia art engages in history with greater nuance forming a cultural archive that is both affective and speculative.

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