

the sacred. Now we are simply migrating these tendencies to our virtual worlds. As a concept and metaphor, the “spiritual marketplace” is, of course, not at all exclusive to contemporary life (consider the mercantile language of Paul or venerated sites and activities of Hermes.) Its pervasive access, however, has empowered practitioners to become deeply creative with their spiritual odysseys.

Virtually Sacred poses questions worth serious consideration. Does transcendence and meaning come with a cost? Is it transferrable via products of commerce? Or is it free-to-play? With the sacred affordance given to our virtual and gaming worlds, along with religious identity and community building, there is perhaps no better time than now to assert critical approaches and expound on the variety of those religious experiences and traditions represented or reassembled.

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Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife

Raiford Guins

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Appendix, notes, bibliography, index.

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A new generation of video game historians must preserve the medium’s heritage before it disappears. In Raiford Guins’s compelling journey as an adventuring media archaeologist, arcade machines from the heyday of arcade video games

are an endangered species: they rot away in dumps, corrode on beachfront boardwalks, and succumb to the indignities of a ceaseless tide of button mashing without the care to keep them running. While threatened in the wild, some fortunate games have been removed from their natural habitats and placed into preserves ranging from museums, private collections, and historically minded arcades. By exploring and documenting the many ways in which people and institutions preserve digital games, Guins challenges the status quo of game history, surveys, and underused artifacts and archives in the United States, and invites others to follow in his footsteps to write a richer history of video gaming. Crucially, Guins’s project is not to engage with games-as-artifacts merely to recapture the authenticity of the play experience at the moment of its release as a consumer product. Instead, he seeks to trace the path of games as they travel through time and space and in so doing take on different meanings, cultural environs, values, and epistemologies.

Following Erkki Huhtamo, Guins chides video game historians for not moving beyond the “chronicle era,” (p. 22) characterized by collecting information from written sources often provided by manufacturers or regurgitated by the enthusiast press with little analysis or theoretical motivation. In opposition to the written accounts of early game history, Guins provides an overview of the collection and presentation of games in museums in chapter 1, using the remains of the Atari *Pong* prototype from 1972 (the harbinger of the coin-operated video game industry) as an exemplary iconic object and Ralph Baer’s fragile “Brown

Box” prototype (the origin of the home console) as a treasured object held but not displayed. In chapter 2, he challenges scholars to engage with archival resources in research libraries and material history—especially extant games and their contemporaneous ephemera and documentation—by providing an overview of major game archives and interviews with the librarians and curators who tend them. For scholars interested in working in video game history, this section provides an invaluable road map to moving beyond industry chronicles and towards in-depth study of gaming’s material culture.

The remainder of the book focuses not on resources suited to the learned scholar but of the role video games play out in the world after their release, a vital part of the “afterlife” of a product of consumer society. Despite their purported technological obsolescence, games from decades past have been taken up by enthusiasts and proponents of video game culture in travelling exhibits like *Videotopia*, “musecades” like the American Classic Arcade Museum at Fun Spot, private collections like Supercade, fan histories like the International Arcade Museum, and collector exhibitions of classic and rare games like *California Extreme*. *Game After* introduces and contextualizes these sites and more with generous illustrations throughout the book that provide key context for the reader (alas, the matte black-and-white printing sometimes lacks enough contrast). Guins has also traveled extensively and collected insightful interviews with actors in diverse roles within game preservation and appreciation. Bringing in voices “from the trenches” of game decay and restoration is a welcome

change in an academic field dominated by players rather than archivists, a perspective that also provides context for how these playful artifacts are presented to the public.

Of course, not all video games go on to circulate as useful objects after their commercial heyday. The fifth chapter is devoted to the infamous Alamogordo landfill where many Atari cartridges (the much-maligned *E.T.* chief among them) were buried in the wake of the 1983 video game industry crash. Between the completion and printing of the book, this chapter has been rendered less interesting, as Guins and a host of journalists and scholars were present for its excavation earlier this year, an event presaged at the very end of the section.

Two case studies in particular stand out as exemplars of the kinds of questions that can be answered and the knowledge that can be uncovered by interrogating the material history of games. The first is an in-depth exploration of the role illustrator Cliff Spohn played in establishing an aesthetic and commercial identity for Atari by creating the evocative portraits that graced game cartridge packaging. Creators who work on the nondigital aspects of early games are ignored with depressing regularity; *Game After*’s thoughtful visual analysis and reproduction of Spohn’s work is a valuable contribution to game studies. Similarly, Guins takes on ur-video game *Tennis for Two* (1958) with outstanding results. Originally created as a curiosity for a public exhibition at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, it turned out to be world historical. Its humble origins meant that the original parts were quickly scavenged and only partial documentation survived. While most video game histo-

ries acknowledge the early digital game in passing, the in-depth examination of recent efforts to reconstruct the title brings into question many of the glib factoids considered *de rigueur* in chronicle-era works, including its very name.

Throughout the book, Guins maintains both a lively, wry narrative of his quest for knowledge and a sharp, thorough grounding in game history, media theory, curation, and media archaeological practice. He has provided a theoretical framework, an excellent guide to the resources

available in the United States, and several strong examples of what the material history of video games can accomplish. If *Game After* is the kind of book that launches a thousand articles, the state of video game history will be drastically improved, and valuable knowledge will be preserved for future generations robbed of those early classics in their original incarnations by the passage of time.

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