

Things Best Forgotten: An Introduction to Oral History for Game Scholars

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INTRODUCTION

The major objective of this workshop is to provide introductory training in oral history practice for game scholars. Oral history occupies an indeterminate place as a historical method within game studies. Recent trends in historical methodologies have pivoted toward materialist media studies, evidenced by the popularity of platform studies, media forensics and media archaeological approaches. These approaches typically use first-person interviews as merely supporting material to a larger story about the technology or mechanics of the game itself. However, when oral history interviewing does take place, it is often granted too much authority as historical evidence. This is very typical in oral histories conducted with major designers, hardware innovators and company founders, whose historical positions of industry leadership are presumed to offer a source of “truth” for historians to document.

This workshop navigates these potential pitfalls through a grounded, exercise-oriented approach to oral history. It will dispel the notion that oral histories are truth-statements or purely good for factual accounts, and instead encourage participants to understand oral history as a dialectical and affective process. Often the most important part of an oral history is not the explicit content of someone’s memory, but *how* they remember, the kinds of words they use to articulate their experiences, and what kinds of details interviewees choose to share.

This workshop is intended as a half-day, 4-hour event that would ideally be attended by no more than a dozen participants. The workshop will open with a discussion of oral history, explaining why historians practice oral history and establishing the differences between oral history, journalistic interviews, and ethnography. Following this, participants will jump right in by conducting interviews with their peers in small groups, sharing their observations in large group discussion, and then watching volunteers engage in interview before the entire group. Throughout these activities, feedback and analysis will be provided by the workshop organizer. The remainder of the workshop will be focused on three topics: best practices for oral history, as established by the Oral History Association; how to scope an oral history project and contact someone to request an interview; and proper equipment and logistics for conducting an oral history. The event

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will conclude with a presentation of major resources and critical readings for more information on oral history.

The workshop organizer has conducted approximately 120 hours of oral histories and interviews with over 40 ex-employees of the computer game company Sierra On-Line, as part of her book project on Sierra's history. She has extensive experience coordinating the preservation of these oral histories with the Strong Museum of Play, and her collection of will comprise the largest body of oral history ever conducted within the field. As part of her "bottom-up" focus on everyday workers (rather than solely company founders and designers), the organizer has deployed both traditional and controversial techniques to locate interviewees and conduct interviews with them. This experience gives the organizer a broad range of experiences to draw from in the workshop, and means she can speak specifically about the unique challenges of conducting oral history in service of the fields of game studies, the history of technology, and media studies.

SUBMISSION

Interested participants should send a 1-page CV and a brief statement (150-200 words) on their specific interest in this workshop and what experience (if any) they have with oral history, historical practice, and professional interviewing. No experience is required to submit.

BIO

Laine Nooney is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media in the School of Literature, Media and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her current book project, *Before We Were Gamers: Remembering and Forgetting an Industry's Dawn*, is a bottom up account of the computer game industry told through a case study of the company Sierra On-Line (1980-2008). Since 2015, she has co-directed the Game Archaeology Lab with Ian Bogost, where she supervises research on the material and historical study of games and personal computers, and is co-founder of *ROMchip: a journal of game histories*, the first peer reviewed journal on the subject, with Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins (launching in 2018).

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