Forgotten, failed, or overlooked?
Towards a critical understanding of
'minor' game histories

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, videogame historians have borrowed extensive methodological and theoretical influence from "media archaeology" – an "undisciplined discipline" (Sobchack, 2011: 323) whose proponents emphasise the search for historically marginalised, forgotten, or "failed" objects and practitioners from the long history of media. Game historians have drawn on media archaeology in order to raise questions regarding the medium's "deep time" lineages (see, for example, Huhtamo 2005; Parikka and Suominen 2006; Parisi 2013) as well as moments of difference and discontinuity not normally discussed in mainstream historical accounts of the medium (Nooney, 2013; Gazzard, 2013).

Yet, although the media archaeological moment has enabled a richer and more comprehensive engagement with game history, it has also contributed to a tendency to fetishize rather than critically account for failure and marginality. Media archaeology, and game history more generally, lacks a sufficient conceptual apparatus for explaining why ostensibly marginalised, forgotten, or overlooked objects and bodies are critical to our conception of the medium today. Laine Nooney (2013: n.p.) offers an important take on these issues by problematizing game history's focus on technical objects rather than bodies, spaces, and memories. She observes that the current archaeological approaches are largely concerned with "widening" the historical remit such that more and more objects can be caught up in the scope of analysis. Yet, when this revisionist logic is applied to archaeologies of gender – when, for example, women are "added on" to game history – it amounts to a tokenistic gesture that sidesteps a genuine confrontation with the politics of marginality. As Nooney observes, given that media archaeology is purportedly interested in recuperating lost and suppressed narratives of media history, it is surprisingly ill-equipped to deal with historically marginalized identities and subject positions. What is lacking, and what this paper aims to develop, are critical frameworks for understanding the political and cultural meanings of marginality in game history.

To this extent, I develop the notion of the historically "minor" as a heuristic device (rather than a stable category) in order to gain a more nuanced perspective on what normally passes as failed, forgotten, or marginal in game history. Most conceptions of history have major and minor moments, just as major and minor voices can be said to inhabit any cultural formation. Yet, I am deploying the term "minor" not to imply

"insignificance," but rather to describe but rather to describe a set of technical and cultural "systems" – objects, subjects, and spaces – that are, for various reasons, positioned against mainstream narratives of game history. Minor histories, cultures, and objects should not solely be defined negatively – that is, in terms of their inability to attain a majority status or reach a mass audience. Indeed, minor histories can deliberately resist mainstream assimilation. They can intervene in dominant expectations of what constitutes success and failure. The historically minor thus contains what Walter Benjamin (1999: 392 [K2,3]) calls an "explosive potential" that, when "ignited," can refresh our awareness of the present and undermine our collective sense of history.

I argue that the historically minor is valuable to the critical historical study of games in three ways. Firstly, *minor histories inhabit moments of rupture*, or periods of discontinuity and transitional instability in game history. These ruptures and transitional moments offer archaeological insight into the way games are or have been understood as a cultural form, and how this understanding has changed across time and space. Secondly, *minor technologies are useful as epistemological tools*, insofar as their recalcitrance forces us to question what we think we know about game history and the ontological stability of our object of study. Finally, *minor histories articulate alternative structures of feeling* – they can provide a window onto suppressed, unrealized, or oppositional cultural and affective patterns in game history.

Any given game technology implies a particular vision – or "structure of feeling" in Raymond Williams's (1961; 1977) terms – of how bodies and technologies should be disposed to each other in its specific cultural epoch. If major game technologies can be said to structure the feeling of specific periods of game history, then minor technologies threaten to the break the hold of what Jacques Rancière (2009) calls the "dominant distribution of the sensible." Minor systems always imply the possibility that things *could* be different, even in questionable or undesirable ways. They possess a capacity to "queer" the dominant temporalities of game history, and destabilize its normative subjects and objects.

Looking at how things could have been different is not only a means of countering increasing standardization in the game industry, or simply a process of correcting omissions, mistakes, or gaps in our knowledge of game history. As Thomas Elsaesser (2016: 99) argues, a "missing link" or "gap" in media history should not simply be treated as a receptacle to be filled with facts. A missing link may, as he puts it, "have its own meaning, but as a gap, a deliberate or accidental omission." The epistemological or theoretical value of studying minor game systems or histories is that their recalcitrance forces us to question what we think we know about game history and the ontological stability of our object of study. Thus, the historically minor provides coordinates for "doing" both game history *and* game theory in alternative ways. In order to illustrate the above arguments, I will analyse and discuss the "Twine" system. Twine is a minor platform where various minor histories, bodies, and spaces have converged in the present, and is therefore well positioned to reflect the arguments made above.

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Benjamin Nicoll is currently working as a sessional lecturer and research assistant at The University of Melbourne. His PhD, which he passed in April 2017, looks at the histories of 'minor' videogame platforms. His research profile can be found here: https://unimelb.academia.edu/BenjaminNicoll

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