

Anything not saved will be lost

On building the VAULT.NRW to preserve the history of the German games development

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Based on Harry Brewis' video essay "ROBLOX_OOF.mp3", which highlights some of the problems of historiography in the games industry, in particular the structural problems in recognizing developers, the article is dedicated to the first important steps towards preserving the history of computer and video games in Germany. The founding of the VAULT.NRW is a promising milestone in the right direction to preserve and promote this history. It is important that we take seriously and document the stories and contributions of all those who were involved in the development of games.

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Almost lost

In November 2022 Harry Brewis, better known by his online persona hbombguy, published the video essay "ROBLOX_OOF.mp3" on the platform Youtube. The video begins as a small study on the origins of a popular sound effect but becomes an in-depth investigation of the many exaggerated and false claims made by musician Tommy Tallarico, concerning his career and his involvement in the creation of several games. In the end the video turns out to be very much a story about who controls the narrative of how games were made and therefore about the history of games itself (Yarwood 2022).

Brewis concludes his essay by stating that this story is not just about the structural exploitation of workers by companies in the games industry, which is equivalent to a critique of capitalism itself. These problems exist in most creative industries. Rather, it is about the question of how to deal with records, with history and how to remember these events and people. The games industry has always had problems with crediting developers appropriately. As early as Atari, it was common for games to be seen as products of the company and not as creative works, so that the names of the developers were not allowed to appear in the games (Fulton 2008). Brewis refers to Mark Cerny, who was not allowed to keep any parts of his work or even documents when he left Atari (hbombguy 2022, 1:46:00 min.).¹

Brewis also emphasizes – citing the work of Hillegonda Rietveld and Andrew Lemon – that this situation particularly affects women who have worked in game development, but whose contribution has been downplayed or claimed by others. For example, it was company policy at Capcom to replace the names of the developers with pseudonyms or to conceal them altogether. Although almost the entire sound team at Capcom in the 1980s and early 1990s consisted of women, including Yoko Shimomura, today one of the best-known female

¹ "I could not take anything with me, when I left Atari. They were not really all that Creator friendly. And when Atari finally closed in 2004 a man named Scott Evans went there that day as they threw out everything from the 30 years of company's history, picked it up and all of the stuff is on his website ATARIGAMES.COM. I'm very grateful he did this, because the only copy of my own design document I have is from the website." (Cerny 2017, 12:35 Min.)

composers for computer and video games, their work remained invisible for a long time. When their music was later used on other consoles, only the names of those who had translated it to the new formats were mentioned. This practice of writing women out of the history of games may also have led to the misperception that game development has always been a male-dominated industry (hbomberguy 2022, 1:46:30 min.; Lemon/Rietveld 2019; Lemon/Rietveld 2021).

But even where developers receive credit, many people do not. In the games press, the idea of the auteur or outstanding genius continues to be promoted by attributing success only to individuals – mostly men with well-known names. This is even though it is well known that dozens, if not hundreds, of people are involved in modern game productions and that the overall creative work can hardly be attributed to a single person. The many who did the real work disappear behind the few, only for their part in history, their work and achievements to be forgotten forever. Although computer and video games are still a young medium, it is already almost impossible to tell their entire story. The history of whole games is in danger of being lost, not to mention the people who made them.

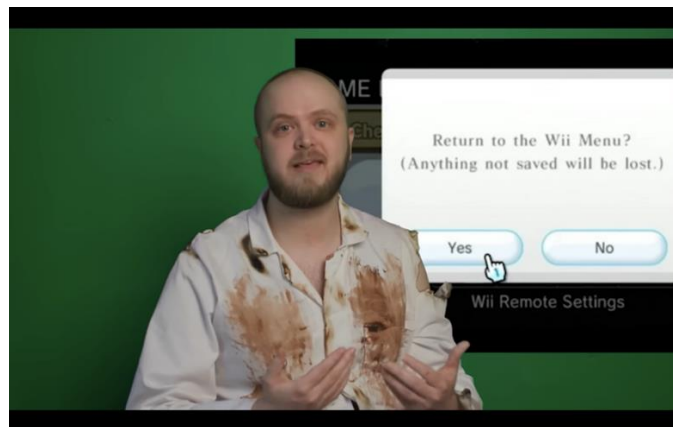


Figure 1. Harry Brewis on “Everything not saved will be lost.” (Screenshot).

The thing about history is, it happens and then it’s gone. If we don’t work to preserve it, eventually it becomes impossible. To quote a famous Nintendo quit screen, “Everything not saved will be lost.” And just as a kicker how hard it is to remember things accurately: the popularized version of the quote is wrong. It’s actually, “Anything not saved.” I’m not trying to be a pedant for once. It’s kind of poignant how easy it is for things to shift like that. If we don’t set a precedent of taking people’s work and the accuracy of records of who did what seriously, we leave it to the liars and opportunists of the world to make up that history [...]. And it honestly on a spiritual level fills me with immense grief thinking about the people who made the things I care about dying unrecognized for what they did and being forgotten. Gaming is just old enough that we’re losing that first generation. [...] The damage to a history, people are at real risk of forgetting, whose main characters are dying, might already have been done. What history will look like 20, 30, a 100 years in the future is being decided now. (hbomberguy 2022, 1:52:03 Min.)

A patched-up history

In the end of June 2021, the Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure (dt., Bundesministerium für Verkehr und digitale Infrastruktur, BMVI) published the first “Strategy for Germany as a Games Hub”. This report was the result of an extensive process in which the

games industry and the public were called upon to identify important areas for political action, strengths and weaknesses of Germany as a location for games development and strategic guidelines.

The “Strategy for Germany as a Games Hub” has since served as the basis for implementing concrete measures together with the industry, other federal ministries and the federal states, including location marketing, but also concrete activities to strengthen networking within the industry and to promote research and development in the games sector. Although responsibility for the topic of games was transferred between ministries several times, the objectives remain unchanged. These include the strengthening historical research:

Video games are works of art and part of our culture. (...) Little research has been conducted into Germany’s role as a producer of games. **Historical research** into games is focused on North America and Japan. Among other sources, relevant archive networks, corporate archives and games collections can support historical research. (BMVI 2021, p. 23)

A first symposium, which focused on the challenges and problems of a historiography of computer and video games in Austria (At), Switzerland (CH) and Germany (D), was held at the University of Wuppertal back in June 2022. The “History of Games – PATCH’D: Symposium on the Early History of Computer Games in Switzerland, Austria and Germany” brought together researchers from German-speaking countries to discuss case studies, projects and perspectives from this field of research, which has so far received little attention (Blankenheim 2022).

The title of this symposium makes use of a common metaphor: that of the “patch” (engl. “to patch” = to mend), a (applied) piece of cloth that closes holes or tears, repairs errors or just fulfills decorative purposes. In the context of software technology, this refers to a precisely defined collection of changes to an existing program. However, the term “patch” does not specify exactly what these changes consist of: one or more files may be replaced by a new version to rectify existing errors in the program (“bug fix”), close security gaps, supplement or update databases, improve functionality and usability or optimize performance. “Patches” therefore primarily make minor repairs, corrections or adjustments possible, even without having the original source code or recompiling the entire program. Although most patches are provided by the original manufacturers of software, they are occasionally also provided by third parties, for example to maintain the support and maintenance of software that is no longer distributed, to circumvent restrictions or locks in software (“cracks”) or to modify software content in a way that is not intended by the manufacturer (cf. Raymond 1991, p. 275f.).

PATCH

A file or set of files that fixes bugs in a game after its release.

After applying a patch, a game is considered patched.

(Thomas, Orland, & Steinberg 2007, p. 49).

The title thus echoes another similar metaphor, chosen by Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins for their 2016 “critical lexicon” and first installment in the “Game Histories” series at MIT Press, called “Debugging Game History”. Lowood and Guins borrow the image of “debugging” – to open up the inner workings of historiography to remove any malfunctions i.e. “bugs” from critical game history – from the history of computers itself. As the editors emphasize, their lexicon is not designed as an encyclopedia of verified historical knowledge – in part due to a lack of corresponding studies. Rather, it is a disciplinary and methodologically diverse attempt to dispel misunderstandings and thus provide a basic terminology – knowing

full well that this could only be the beginning of a better historiography (cf. Lowood & Guins 2016, pp. XIII-XX; Raymond 1991, pp. 82-84).

Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins follow up on Erkki Huhtamo's 2005 criticism of a history of computer and video games, which has so far emerged primarily from the environment of journalism, private collecting and enthusiastic fandom. This first phase of historiography, the so-called "era of chronicles", has produced many writings that, while gathering fundamental data and documents, are also characterized by autobiographical anecdotes, nostalgic glorification and technological determinism. Critical interpretation and analysis, contextualization and a methodical approach are now needed to counter this (cf. Huhtamo 2005). But the history of computer and video games has not only been plagued by methodological problems.

Its research has so far been almost exclusively determined by a US-American perspective, which primarily focuses on the production and reception of games on the American continent and possibly in Japan, and at the same time – from today's perspective – tells this story as an ultimately inevitable economic success story. While this story may well be relevant as part of a larger narrative, it is of course incomplete when looking at the rest of the world, where a large number of regional and national game cultures have developed. Often unaffected by national borders and technical limitations, games have been actively appropriated, adapted to local political and cultural conditions, copied, imitated and understood as a starting point for one's own production. These countless regional and transnational historical game cultures are in danger of being lost.

Fortunately, the inter- and transnational historiography of computer and video games has become the focus of attention in recent years. For example, the third international "History of Games" conference (21-24 October 2020) was dedicated to "Transnational game histories", organized by a committee from around the world (<https://www.history-of-games.com>). In addition, a whole series of insightful studies have recently been published that deal with the history of individual regions or nations, including Australia and New Zealand (Swalwell 2021), Great Britain (Kirkpatrick 2015; Gazzard 2016-2018; Wade 2016), France (Blanchet & Montagnon 2020; Breem & Krywicki 2020), the Netherlands (Lenting 2019) and historical Czechoslovakia (ČSSR) (Švelch 2018). These studies not only take into account the particularities of individual national gaming cultures in their historical contexts, but also their diverse interconnections within Europe and the world.

Given the increasing number of voices that can be heard in the history of computer and video games, the question arises as to whether this new narrative does not necessarily have to be a "patchwork" that also sees itself as a conscious counter-history to the teleological narratives that have dominated up until now. In this sense, a comprehensive "patch management" is needed in order to compile and compare the diverse findings and ultimately arrive at a world history of digital games.

In this patchwork of multilingualism and polyphony, however, historiography in German-speaking countries has been mostly silent. If you take Tristan Donovan's *Replay* from 2010, a book by a British journalist and one of the few that even attempts an international perspective, the "German" history of game development, for example, does not even take up two pages; Switzerland and Austria are not even mentioned (cf. Donovan 2010, p. 131f.). It was one of the particularly fortunate circumstances of the symposium that the members of the Sinergia project "Confoederatio Ludens – Researching Swiss Game Cultures 1968-2000", that looks at the vibrant game design and development scene in the pre-Internet age of Switzerland, with its

many niches, sub-scenes and complex multi-language layout, had just received the approval of funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation SNF (CH Ludens 2023-2025).

The aim is therefore not only to complete a missing piece in the “History of Games”, but also to identify the seams and common patterns that ultimately make up the dense fabric of a European history of computer and video games. Within this framework, the project group (P) Austria (At), Switzerland (CH) and Germany (D) is a first step to consolidate existing studies and their results, stimulate exchange between researchers and coordinate interdisciplinary and transnational cooperation (cf. Pfister 2021; Pfister & Rochat 2021; Pfister & Potthast 2024). The symposium on the early history of computer games in Switzerland, Austria and Germany formed a first patch for this history, with the intention of being able to continue working with an updated and improved – a PAtCH'D – version from now on. As in the world of software, however, there will be more to come.

Building a vault

The event itself was born out of the idea of bringing together researchers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland who are studying the history of computer and video games. However, the symposium made one thing very clear: the historiography of computer and video games in Germany is in a far worse state than expected. There are only a small number of writings that attempt to write a history of German games culture, and these often remain fragmentary (Forster 2013; Lange & Liebe 2015; Computerspielmuseum 2018).²



Figure 2. Logo of the VAULT.NRW.

Thus – just a few days before the start of FROG 2024 in Vienna – the VAULT.NRW – Videogame archive for business history, literature and technical culture for North Rhine-Westphalia (dt., Videospiel-Archiv für Unternehmensgeschichte, Literatur und Technikkultur NRW) was founded. The purpose of the VAULT.NRW is to promote science and research in the context of the history of video and computer games, primarily but not exclusively with reference to North Rhine-Westphalia. To this end, historical material in particular is to be collected, documented, archived, preserved, exhibited and published, company archives and private collections and estates are to be taken into care and maintained.³

Until now, there has been no public or private archive in Germany dedicated to the preservation, research and documentation of local video and computer game history. The “International Center for the History of Electronic Games” at “The Strong – National Museum of Play” in Rochester, New York, and the “Video Game History Foundation” based in Oakland, California, are actively involved in the preservation of the US history of video and computer games. The two institutions in Germany that in part receive public funding are the

² Even the author’s dissertation entitled “The Art of Computer Game Design – On the aesthetics of production in computer games (1982–1996) in the light of historical literature of art”, was written with a focus on US literature on game design (Blankenheim 2023). However, the examination of the early games by Electronic Arts as part of the exhibition “Game Designers & Software Artists” had certainly shown that game development in Germany is connected to that in the USA in many ways (Blankenheim 2020).

³ The VAULT.NRW is founded as a non-profit entrepreneurial company with limited liability (dt., gemeinnützige Unternehmungsgesellschaft (haftungsbeschränkt), gUG).

Computerspielemuseum in Berlin and the permanent games exhibition at the ZKM Karlsruhe. While both institutions reliably attract visitors and are present in public, neither of them is dedicated to systematic historical research and the archiving of historical material. Private collections scattered across Germany focus primarily on collecting games and gaming hardware. The BINARIUM in Dortmund, one of the few publicly accessible private museums in NRW, closed in 2023.

As early as the 1980s, a lively computer and video game development scene developed in North Rhine-Westphalia. Among the first centers were Aachen, Gütersloh, Mülheim an der Ruhr, Kaarst and finally Düsseldorf and Cologne. The foundations of a new, young creative industry were laid here, combining technological expertise, creative ambition and entrepreneurial spirit. However, although North Rhine-Westphalia is now one of the best and economically strongest locations for game production in Germany, the industry's long association with this federal state has not been historically and systematically addressed. Computer and video games are not only a part of art and cultural history, but also an important piece of NRW state history. This history of their creation, distribution and playful appropriation needs to be preserved and told. The VAULT.NRW has set itself the goal of placing precisely this history at the center of its activities.

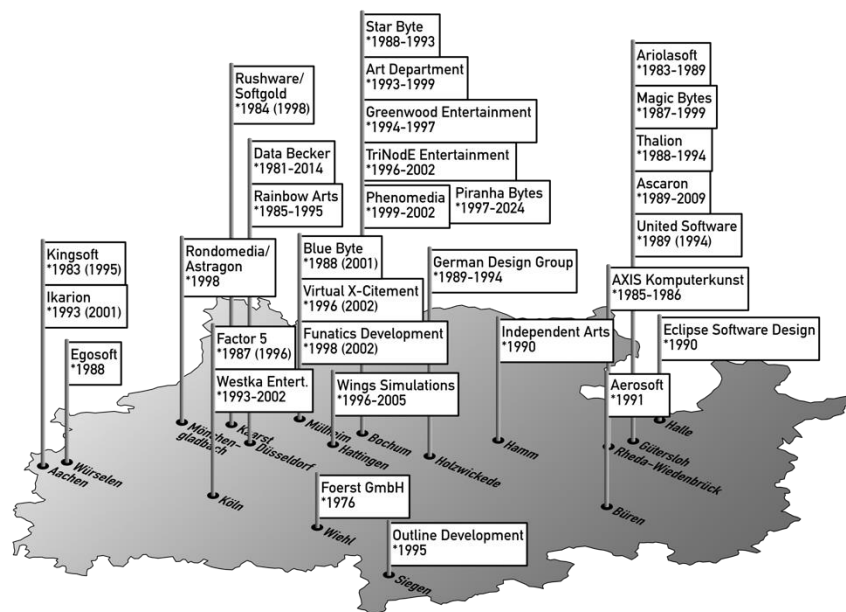


Figure 3. Companies involved in game development in North Rhine-Westphalia from 1976 to 2000.

The VAULT.NRW provides a wide range of services for the three areas of publishing, teaching and exhibiting. As a publishing house, the VAULT.NRW offers publication projects from a single source. The services range from researching and writing texts, to the complete editorial support and design of brochures, books, poster series or information stands, all the way to the production of accompanying films. As a teaching institution, the VAULT.NRW plans and organizes lectures, seminars and other events for universities and companies as well as public and private educational institutions, both independently and on request. It also produces teaching materials for the classroom. As a museum, the VAULT.NRW independently designs and curates exhibitions, advises corresponding projects, e.g. on the procurement of exhibits, and offers guided tours and accompanying events. It also produces complete exhibition catalogs.

Finally, the VAULT.NRW offers itself as a central hub for the state and national history of computer and video games for the press and other media as a discussion partner. In order to establish itself in the public eye as just such a central hub, the VAULT.NRW specifically seeks cooperation with associations and foundations as well as partnerships with companies in the video games industry in order to gain access to unique artifacts. The history of computer and video games should be accessible to everyone interested, which is why the gradual digitization and provision of the collection is one of the archive's most important goals. The term "vault" has also been used for many years for the online platform of the Game Developers Conference (GDC), the largest and oldest international conference series for computer and video game developers. In particular, videos and audio recordings of presentations and discussions on the topic of game development are made available there.⁴

The VAULT.NRW aims to become an important hub for the preservation of collections, company archives and personal papers on computer and video game history in Germany. With its publications, training and information offerings, the archive is to grow into a comprehensive center for the preservation, documentation, research and presentation of video game culture for both the games industry and the public. By proactively approaching the industry, collectors and former stakeholders in computer and video game history, the archive aims to prevent the loss of historically important material, beyond a collecting approach that focuses solely on a canon of gaming software and hardware (Blankenheim 2025).

Its positioning as a non-profit also puts the VAULT.NRW in the position of being able to apply for private as well as public funding for projects and archives. By simultaneously approaching private and public donors at local, regional, national and European level, funding for research projects can also be secured beyond the university system. Submitting funding applications, collecting donations and acquiring funds from various sources is therefore another important task of the archive. The VAULT.NRW is only just beginning. The first projects are underway. An important milestone will be to open the archive at a permanent, publicly accessible location. However, there is still a lot to do before then.

The End Games

Everything not saved will be lost
— Nintendo "Quit Screen" message
(Martin 2013, p. ix)

When Harry Brewis pointed out at the end of his video essay that the popular phrase "Everything not saved will be lost", as it had spread on the internet, was incorrectly quoted, he ignored its origin. The altered version of the quote probably goes back to the 2013 novel *The End Games* by T. Michael Martin, to which it is added as one of two epigraphs. Martin's debut novel is – of course – an apocalyptic tale of two brothers fighting their way through endless hordes of "Bellows" – Zombie-like creatures – in the rural mountains of West Virginia. While there is little left of our civilization in this world, it is the remnants of gaming culture that bind the two brothers together. Not only does it shape the way the brothers communicate with each

⁴ The game *Fallout* (1997) coined the term "Vault" as a name for a nuclear underground bunker (Görger/Pfister/Blankenheim 2024). Tim Cain, lead developer of *Fallout*, later recalled that his biggest regret in developing *Fallout 2* was not realizing his idea of the "Abbey of Lost Knowledge", which was designed as a clear reference to the novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller, Jr. and would have been closer to an archive of the civilized world. This idea was canceled early on due to the enormous scope and the very tight schedule for the development of less than a year, which would ultimately lead to Cain and other developers to leave the project, being burned out, after the first few months (Cain 2023, 5:25 Min.).

other, there are also many relics, from the Pokémon sleeping bag to the Pikachu knapsack, that tell of the old world.

As the author himself explained in a YouTube video, the quote was not included in the first version of the manuscript. However, when he was working on his revisions, intimidated and stressed by the fear of disappointing his editor, he repeatedly played *Mario Galaxy* on the Nintendo Wii to relax. It was only then that he noticed the quote. He found it surprisingly touching and appropriate to introduce his story. And so, he adapted it. However, it is important to note that the quote is only one of two epigraphs. The first quote comes from Albert Camus, who said: “I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment, it takes place every day.” So while Camus was of the opinion that, in Martin’s words, you can press the reset button every day of your life, the Nintendo quote seems to imply that people can well and truly be lost. *The End Games* was Martin’s attempt to find out which one of those two quotes is more true (Martin 2014).

Let’s hope it’s not too late to press the reset button on archiving the German history of computer and video games. Otherwise anything not saved will be lost.

About the Author

Dr. Björn Blankenheim is the founder and director of VAULT.NRW. His dissertation *Die Kunst des Computer Game Design* deals with the production aesthetics of computer games (1982–1996) in the context of the literature of art. From 2015 to 2018 he supervised a project on the literature of art and the art of teaching. In 2022 he curated the exhibition *Game Designers & Software Artists* and organized the symposium *History of Games – PAAtCH’D*. As part of the archive, he researches, writes and teaches on the topics of computer and video game history, game design and game rhetoric.

Website: <https://vault.nrw>

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