Reassembling the Ruined Archive

A Ludology of *Her Story* as Archival Practice

David Leblanc

Her Story (2015), independently developed by Sam Barlow, is a video game about cataloguing media[1]—which, admittedly, can seem like a hard sell to gamers, despite its many accolades. The game seats players at a police database computer as they are tasked with piecing back together the ambiguous circumstances of an unsolved murder case. Players sift through markedly 1990s-looking police interrogation footage scrambled by digital transfer; these videos document Hannah Smith's telling of the events leading up to her husband Simon's murder. *Her Story* is an interactive crime procedural game told through the technological apparatus of a database in disarray. More importantly, it is a ludic experiment operating at the limits of play in archival practice and an attempt to explore the productive possibilities of technological disrepair. In this brief intervention, I consider Sam Barlow's interactive text within the theoretical frameworks of technological nostalgia and the sedimented temporalities of the archive in ruin. The experience of playing the game, as I hope to show, is ultimately one of media archeology—of trying to make sense of the analog deep time flattened by the problematic yet productive technological apparatus of digital encoding. That is to say,

I take *Her Story* as an opportunity to rethink the possible theoretical approaches to games by placing the nascent field of games studies in conversation with longer traditions of media archeology, characteristic of the material and archival turn in the genealogy of film studies. *Her Story* may elicit the joys of narrative coherence as the reassemblage of an archive in disrepair. At the same time, the game complicates the very idea of what an archive can be, the kind of knowledge it provides, and the way it can be accessed.

In *Her Story,* players curate an archive—they scrub, label, tag, and organize media. However, much like the film archivist or media archeologist, memory itself is often at stake when digging through the folds of time. Like the game's own complicated

relationship to the archive's ontological purpose, this intervention is itself about toying with the idea of the database as narrative form, which may, incidentally, lead us to an end with more questions than answers. Mediated through the emulated glow of a retro CRT desktop monitor, the game's interface throws back to a bygone technological aesthetic, including a graphical user interface making an obvious gesture to the iconography and default teal tones of *Window's 95*, and the scan lines characteristic to cathode illumination drawing patterns. The game's instructions are provided diegetically by a 'readme' file stored on the desktop, which mentions, "the L.O.G.I.C. database is one of the many continuing efforts to digitize our workflow and preserve evidence in a manner which will allow you to work more efficiently." The case files under question, as mentioned earlier, are extensive interviews conducted with Hannah Smith, a person of interest in the disappearance and subsequent death of her husband.

Another readme file further informs players, "They transferred the videos off the original tapes in 1999 and then the Y2K thing hit and they got mothballed." In this way, the archive is, figuratively speaking, in ruin. The clips are scrambled, unlabelled, and undated. By searching for specific terms in the inaccessible transcripts of Hannah's responses, (i.e., a search for 'murder' will pull up the most relevant videos where the word is spoken) players slowly make sense of her story: one of a murdered lover, an estranged twin, and a secret double life. It is the player's job to make *sense* of the narrative that emerges from the ruined archive.

The actual story of the game is rather convoluted and open to interpretation. For the purposes of this text, I am less concerned with the narrative details, and more in the ways in which we interact with the archive and come to terms with what we do and do not know. Although games have their respective concerns of narratology and communicability, the way *Her Story* develops a growing sense of knowledge, of *what has happened*,

is precisely what is at stake in approaching the archive as an interactive form in and of itself. *Her Story* has a linear narrative embedded deep within the folds of its disrepair, but it is fragmented and individualized for each player based on the whims of their respective investigations. In effect, players determined to *know* can exercise their own media archeological skills by simply searching the game's directory files, where one can find each video segment conveniently ordered and labelled. The game's ludic motivation, or the very reason we play, is contingent on the virtual archive's manufactured technological disrepair and the continued efforts restoring its usability.

Her Story does not have a traditional ending to the game, not defined by the conclusion of a story, *per se*. Instead, the game supposes that players will stop when they are satisfied with what they know, or what they think they know. Its undetermined "non-ending" has reasonably confounded many. On the game's Steam message board, for example, a user asks, "I realize we are supposed to look through the clips and find out something… but what? And when we do find it out, what next?" To which another user responds, "It's up to you to decide when you're satisfied with the information you have found." Astutely, or profoundly even, the original inquirer finally asks, "How do I decide when I'm satisfied?" (Steam Community 2015). While facetious, this exchange articulates one of the more important concerns of media archeology, archival practices, and ultimately, ways of knowing. That is, when are we done building an archive? Can an archive ever be complete? When will or can we be satisfied with what we know? And moreover, how do we *know* what satisfaction *feels* like?

Part of the satisfaction we might get from the game, or otherwise struggle to achieve, I wager, stems from the game's retro VHS aesthetic. *Her Story* garners this style by means of double remediation. In an interview, Sam Barlow explains how the video footage, stored on a laptop, runs through two VHS players, deteriorating the image before finally being ported to another laptop and included in the game (Mckeand 2015). The game's archive is in ruin, as is the image. In "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," Dominik Schrey explains, "the longing for what is assumed to be lost in the continuing process of digitization… accounts for contemporary media culture's widespread romanticizing and fetishizing of analogue media" (Schrey 2014, 28). "Analogue nostalgia," he continues, "expresses a desire for indexicality and a retrospective fondness for the 'problems' of decay and generational loss that analog video posed" (Schrey 2014, 28). *Her Story* fetishizes the visual dimension of analogue media at the expense of its actual materiality while nonetheless evoking the seductive indexicality and instability of its material decay.

Categorizing *Her Story* as an archival game calls upon ways in which film scholars have previously tended to the material and aesthetic forms structuring the communicative efforts of visual texts. In her book, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Catherine Russell discusses the aesthetic implications of structural cinema. The structural film, as Russell suggests, is defined by its formal intervention. Like Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, for example, *Her Story* not only draw our attention to the materiality of the distorted image, it also shifts our attention to the frame: the windows of the programs on the computer, the frame of the camera that films the interviews, and the frame of our *own* computer that these structural openings inhabit. "The fixed frame," Russell writes, "represents the intentionality of phenomenological consciousness, but it equally determines the limits of the visible and the knowable" (Russell 1999, 158). Similarly, the means of generating knowledge in *Her Story* emerges from the inner frame of the game: the database and the interpretations we make about our findings ultimately become the site of what is knowable.

Conversely, the structural film also operates on a temporal regime: one of duration, rather than of montage, in conveying the passing of time. The order of the clips in *Her Story* is scrambled and the archivist, or the player, generates their respective version of the narrative with its own twists and turns, dead ends and revelations, in re-assembling the pieces together. There, nonetheless, remains the sentiment that they do not quite fit—the futility of complete assemblage makes itself clear in the unlikelihood of achieving that perfect order by chance. The structure of the montage in the game is precisely one of disorder and of discontinuity. Structural film is a mode of observation, meditation. In the tradition of non-narrative cinema, *Her Story* embraces this discontinuity and places the player in the position of having to parse the gaps.

The more I meditate upon the game, trying

to make sense of this fragmented story, the more I find myself paying attention to the figurative materiality of that otherwise virtual experience. The flicker in the image, the grain of the damaged VHS tapes, the glare of the ambient lighting upon the reflective surface of the screen, or, perhaps most profoundly, the momentary enlightenment of a car's headlights as it corners around the virtual building. That last moment, the passing headlights shining a brighter glow than the fluorescent lights, is an uncanny one. Russell notes, "the metaphoric inscription of a window…(as frames within the frame)"—much like the technological interface in *Her Story*—"marks a divide between two spaces, situating the seeing subject in a material relation to the pro filmic" (Russell 1999, 159). While the reflection on the in-game screen may be subtle, a silhouette and the vague features of a woman are nonetheless visible—a woman who, incidentally, bears a striking resemblance to Hannah, the interviewee.

While I have omitted the narrative details so far, this resemblance bears a narrative significance: it is revealed that Hannah, who actually has a twin sister, Eve (although conspiracy theorists might allege that there is, in fact, only one Hannah with a split personality) actually carries to term and abandons a child otherwise thought to have been terminated. *Her Story*'s endgame is to recognize, through piecing together the convoluted narrative, that *I*, the player-character, am that person, am that child.

However, I propose resisting the narrative determinism that the *ending* is what the game is truly after. Rather, in the vein of the structural film, I suggest that the epiphany *Her Story* wants players to have is not the one in which they blow the case wide open, so to speak. Instead, it is the one in which they recognize the materiality of this twice-mediated game experience, and come to terms with their own body positioned vis-à-vis the interface as something else other than merely a virtual appendage of the database. As Russell further suggests, "by rendering the window on the world a surface image, an image without depth, the observer…can always catch him- or herself watching" (Russell 1999, 161).

Along another theoretical basis, media archeology can give us the materials or the tools to understand how *Her Story* plays temporally. While media archeology often operates under the temporality of deep time, *Her Story* plays on a temporal regime known as 'surface time' or, in other words, where time and history are collapsed or flattened in the database. Jussi Parikka mentions in his recent work, *What is Media Archeology*, that "media cultures are sedimented and layered, a fold of time and materiality where the past might be suddenly discovered anew" (Parikka 2012, 3). Conversely, *Her Story*'s segmented and disorganized videos can *only* provide a surface reading of the archive—each video merely skims the surface of a possible vertical slice of narrative continuity that remains inaccessible by virtue of its disrepair.

The crux of the game itself is one of temporality. As aforementioned, the readme text in the game tells us that the video files, after being digitized from VHS tapes in 1999, got 'mothballed' by the Y2K thing. That 'thing' is the Y2K bug, a computational error in the COBOL coding language used in many databases and IT sectors. In essence, the year 2000 would appear in the two-digit year nomenclature as '00,' which computers would interpret as either 1900, setting humanity back one hundred years, or 19100, fast-forwarding time seventeen thousand years. In that instance, according to computational logic, the year would be *both*. The stretched-out and folded flattening of time in the year 2000 is, admittedly, a background conceit in the game. Nonetheless, this gestures towards the temporal regime of fragmentation and sedimentation that the game deploys.

Her Story's ruined archive—the fragmentation and indexical disarray of the otherwise 'ordered' database—becomes perhaps the most appropriate allegory for this temporal flattening. As Russell points out, "By means of juxtaposition, fragmentation, and interruption, the archival film brings past, present, and future into a new nonlinear temporality" (Russell 1999, 264). "The salvage paradigm" inherent to found footage filmmaking and equally relevant to *Her Story*'s conceit of failed technological cataloguing and visual artifacts of video decay actualizes this aesthetic of disrepair, "making each rescued image into an allegorical form of representation, a ruin" (Russell 1999, 264).

Her Story coaxes us into confronting a fragmented subjectivity, both our own as players and as archivists, as enacted with Hannah in the game itself. The medium specificity of *Her Story* as an experimental narrative game—an archive or database perpetu-

ally in the making, toyed or being played with, always in the process of becoming itself—ultimately challenges what we may call the ideological fortification of the archive. The game also problematizes the medium's very basic concerns of continuity and ludic congruity, which further sustains an understanding of the perennially uneven, overlapping, discontinuous, and fragmentary order of the archive. *Her Story* reconfigures the database both as a ludic and narrative form, allowing it to emerge as an immanently personal, yet fragmented confession or, in other words, a ruin.

References

Dylan Bain [Steam Username]. 2015. "What to do?" Steam Community: *Her Story*, General Discussions. 24 June, 2015. Accessed May 20, 2018. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/368370/discussions/0/530645446308194754/#c530645 446308392090>

Mckeand, Kirk. 2015. "Howdunnit: The making of Her Story." Pocket Gamer. 13 October, 2015. Accessed May 20, 2018. <http://www.pocketgamer.biz/feature/62104/making-of-her-story/>

Parikka, Jussi. 2013. *What is Media Archeology?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Schrey, Dominik. 2014. "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation." In *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future,* edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 27-38. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Endnotes

1 Despite making the perennial *faux pas* in film and media studies of attributing production and development of a text to a single authorial e, Sam Barlow nonetheless situates himself at the center of the production cycles as the game's *auteur* (as developer/designer/writer/publisher).