Book Review

Review of Replayed: Essential Writings on Software Preservation and Game Histories (2023); Johns Hopkins Press | Henry Lowood | Edited by Raiford Guins

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A funny thing happens when a career historian’s writings are collected and presented as a cohesive volume: that book itself becomes both a history and an archive. Henry Lowood – the central figure of this retrospective – is the Harold C. Hohbach Curator of the History of Science and Technology Collections at Stanford University, where he also curates Stanford Library’s Film and Media Collections. In addition to his bona fides in German history, rare books (especially medical and scientific incunabula), and the history of physics, Lowood is also a historian, archivist, teacher, and curator of computer history. He is a co-founder and co-editor of ROMChip: A Journal of Game Histories, co-editor of MIT’s “Game Histories” book series, and the author of dozens of essays related to the history of technology. From bibliographies of physicists such as Ernest Rutherford and Max Planck and examinations of German forestry management to social and commercial histories of military simulations and World of Warcraft, since the 1970s Lowood has been (re)introducing the world to hidden gems of scientific and technological literature. Along the way, he has regularly delivered insights about computer history, many of which were gleaned through direct experience with the field’s pioneers and the countless artifacts their work produced.

In this volume, Lowood’s four decades of storytelling about the intricacies and curiosities of technology create a chatoyant backdrop for a group of writings primarily about the history of software preservation and game histories. By the time I was a quarter of the way through this baker’s dozen of Lowood’s essays – perfectly curated by editor Raiford Guins – I knew that this was not going to be the leisurely read I had anticipated. I’ve been a computer game archivist since the late 1990s, helped establish the University of Arizona’s Software Preservation team, and have built my career around topics related to the history of computing. Reading this volume, I imagined, would be like having beers with a long-time office acquaintance who you’ve discovered has all the same hobbies as you. Certainly the photo of Lowood on the cover suggests a good pub palaver is just around the corner.

I wasn’t wrong, but the read didn’t go quite the way I’d imagined. Instead of swinging nostalgically through a set of essays about topics quite familiar to me, I found myself pulled in hard and confronted with dazzling observations about how the histories of technology, computing, and games were nested, synergistic, and mercurial. The chapters range from charmingly astute to thrillingly prescient, and more than once I found myself digging back through the notes with the thought: “Wait. When did he write this?” The answer, I almost always discovered, was “before anyone else.”

Pick a page – any page – and you’ll discover a multitude of arresting insights, brushes with greatness, and charming metaphors that will have you thinking about everything from game engines to the founding principles of the International Olympic Committee in entirely new ways. From his earliest days, Lowood appears to have donned a hat woven of wonder: I wonder how we could archive something that has no materiality. I wonder how we could preserve the experience of game play. I wonder how videogame studies fit into the much longer histories of computing and technology. These and other puzzles form the basis of this collection. Sometimes Lowood offers answers, sometimes he seems to simply set the puzzles loose to see what will happen next.

This kind of “leaning on the shovel” (a conceptual theme in the book) is part of what comprises the generosity of ideas and collaboration that suffuses Replayed, not only in Lowood’s essays – which span the first two decades of the 2000s – but also in the ancillary apparatus: Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “Foreword,” Raiford Guins’ “Editor’s Introduction,” Lowood’s context-setting section introductions (the book has three sections, each containing several essays – “Archives, Documentation, and the Preservation of Historical Software”; “Game Histories and Historiography”; “Further Directions: Sports Games and eSports”), and T.L. Taylor’s “Interview with Henry Lowood.” Kirschenbaum, Guins, and Taylor exhibit clear simpatico with Lowood, which makes their contributions to the volume just as sharp and enjoyable as the works they bookend.

Ultimately, I found Lowood’s sense of wonder to be infectious. The marginalia in my copy of Replayed read like surrealist prompts: “propose reality show in which TV sitcom stars compete against each other in Counter-Strike or Football Manager”; “develop game about historical reenactors working their way up the ladder from ‘fodder’ to ‘living historian’”; “if the history of games is in its infancy, what is its pacifier and who changes its diapers?” And so on. Individually, the essays document key moments in the
history of software preservation, directly addressing questions like why software preservation matters; why games (video and otherwise) are significant beacons for navigating among broader explorations of technology history; how we are to reconcile (or at least accept) the contradiction that (these days) Huizinga’s “magic circle” – the place beyond quotidian reality where play happens – always already has a box office and merch table; and what exactly is meant when we talk about “primary sources” in game studies.

In answering these and related questions, Lowood methodically documents the history of numerous ludic forms: tabletop games, board game counters, coin-op video game consoles, military simulations, play-by-mail gaming, machinima, e-sports, and innumerable other analog and digital adminicularities. This is what makes Replayed more than a record of one historian’s views on software preservation and game history, making it an archive itself. Thanks to his predilection for saving things in case they’re important (e.g., boxes of handwritten notes, order-of-battle sheets, and personal correspondence exchanged among wargamers in the 1980s and 90s), his bibliographer’s sense of organization, and his curator’s eye, Lowood in these essays has concentrated a trove of almost-lost references to the people, places, practices, and paraphernalia of computer and game history.

Given Lowood’s ranging and churning mind (to invoke Matt Kirschenbaum’s lovely, personal “Foreword”), not to mention his inveterate delight in connecting with new ideas and people (a quality showcased particularly well in T.L. Taylor’s perceptively guided interview with Lowood), it is worth calling attention to Raiford Guins’ editorial work on this project. In assembling the book, Guins has done the fields of game studies, software preservation, and computer history a great service, effectively creating a much-needed finding aid for some of the key works in Lowood’s oeuvre. In his introduction to the section on game histories and historiographies, Lowood proposes that “good histories of games are rarely, if ever, just about games” (160). Replayed is about so much more than games, software, or even Lowood himself. It is about the world of play and the cultures it produces, as well as about the importance of attending to how the smallest details are connected to global patterns. To paraphrase Lowood: Replayed concentrates into one volume a host of good questions and big ideas designed not only to help scholars make sense of computing’s history, but also to seek connections far beyond the fields of game studies, software preservation, and the history of technology.