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Byte-by-Byte: Open-Sourcing Video Game Graphic Arts History

By: Amanda McCorquodale | July 30, 2017



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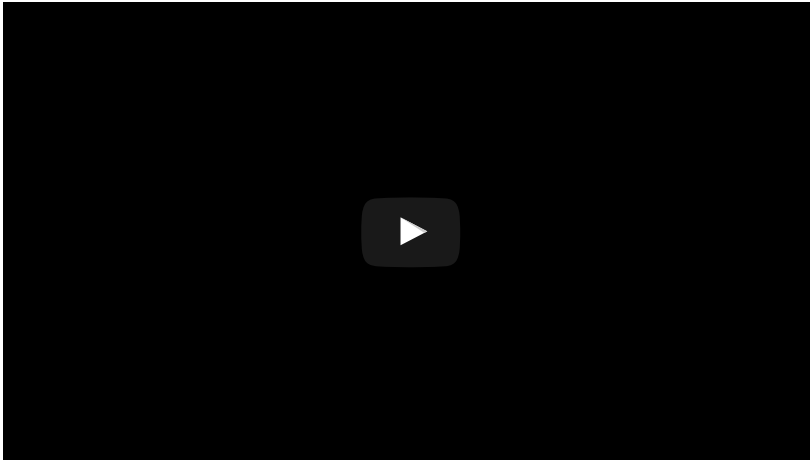


The Video Game History Foundation wants to make video games' source code, design documents and related marketing material as accessible as movie scripts.

According to the Library of Congress, 75% of all films made before 1929 are gone forever. "It's not that they're hard to find, they just don't exist anymore. I find that terrifying," says Frank Cifaldi, who is intent on saving another disappearing art form through [The Video Game History Foundation](#).

Cifaldi has been in the video game industry since 2005 as a journalist, editor, developer and content producer. Before that he was a video game preservation hobbyist involved in software emulation. "In the late 1990s, I discovered I could download and play these old games from my childhood on my computer and to

me, that was magic,” he says. “Soon I was looking for the rarer, deeper cuts of games and even got involved with ROM dumping, which is locating hard-to-find games and then sending them to people with the custom hardware to extract data from them.”



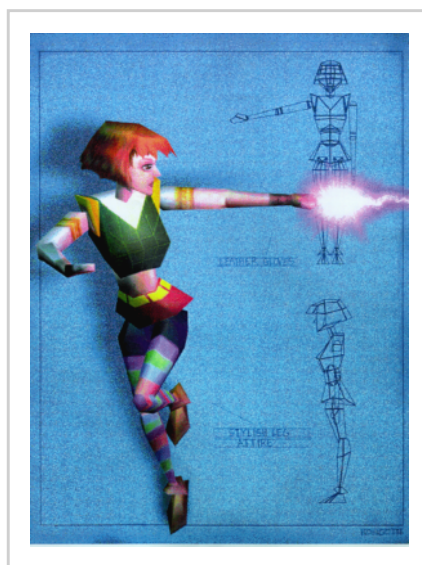
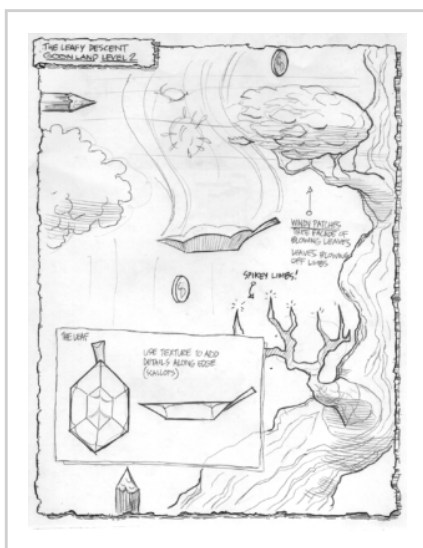
“I’ve come to realize that my interest in piracy stemmed from a desire to preserve old games and make them available,” says Cifaldi, who only recently decided to formalize his longtime passion into a legit 501(c)3 foundation. “Places like the National Videogame Museum in Frisco, TX and the National Museum of Play in Rochester, NY are great at archiving the physical games and gaming systems, but they’re not great at preserving the digital,” he explains. “There’s stuff that’s in greater danger of disappearing: source code, early versions of games and the ephemera—the disposable materials that surround a game’s release.”

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Through The Video Game History Foundation, Cifaldi wants to make video games’ source code, design documents and related marketing material as accessible as movie shooting scripts. “Without source code, there’s no way to remaster a game for a modern platform. Code can also reveal behind-the-scenes info such as which dialogue and features were cut,” he says. “It paints the narrative of the game development process of, for example, how a designer’s vision for a game was more ambitious than the final product.”



By recovering original assets, the Foundation is able to restore art that has been damaged, such as this very early screenshot of Ocarina of Time.



Concept art Pandemonium 1996 concept art pulled from a Zip disk

The Foundation will also archive early versions or unreleased drafts of games. “This is where you can really compare the graphic choices for a game,” Cifaldi says. “In the early draft of ‘The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time,’ which was released in 1998, you can clearly see how character development and UI design have evolved over time.”

Unlike other video game archives, Cifaldi's Foundation will preserve games' marketing and packaging materials. "They put the games in historical context and reveal the narrative behind graphic or UI choices," he says. With his contacts in the industry, Cifaldi recently uncovered a treasure chest of such ephemera in the offices of *Game Informer*, the oldest surviving video game magazine in America. "There were five file cabinets full of every press release and film transparency for game art that was ever sent, going all the way back to its first issue in 1991. They actually drilled open one of the locks that hadn't been opened since the 1990s. We're currently sorting and digitizing those thousands of pieces of video game history."



From the Capcom Craze Club brochure, this was a fan club you could join if you were into Capcom's games in the early 90s.

Although Cifaldi is currently in the hunting, sorting, and digitizing stage, he hopes to translate his wealth of finds into a very searchable online library of digital material. "I want people to be able to search by person, game, company and genre, and pull up press clippings, packaging art, design materials, and source code," he says.

It's clear that early films' demise continues to motivate Cifaldi in his quest to safeguard early gaming. "If you're comparing it to cinema, video games are just at the talkie era. We've just hit the point where we have sound," he says. "We haven't arrived at what interactive storytelling is because we're still just poking at the idea of interacting with a video signal. The medium is rapidly evolving into a major means of artistic expression, and we don't want to lose the story of how we got here."