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# **Volatile Memories: Personal Data and Posthuman Subjectivity in ‘The Aspern Papers’, *Analogue: A Hate Story* and *Tacoma***

## **Introduction**

This article analyses two works of ‘literary-ludic’ science fiction (Ennslin, 2014, p.5), Christine Love’s *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and Fullbright’s *Tacoma* (2017), alongside the 1908 version of Henry James’ ‘The Aspern Papers’, a tale narrated by a man obsessed with laying his hands on a long-dead Romantic poet’s archive. Tracing the trajectory from the Romantic(ized) past evoked in James’ novella to the posthuman futures portrayed in *Analogue* and *Tacoma*, it aims to highlight both what these games inherit from their literary precursors, and how they draw on the expressive vocabulary of gaming to explore the implications of ‘datafication’ and digital archiving.<sup>1</sup>

The first section of the article argues that the growing popularity of literary-ludic forms like the ‘walking simulator’ and the ‘interface game’ (both of which might be considered part of the broader category of ‘archival adventures’ (Kagen, 2018)) needs to be understood in relation to discourses of ‘dataism’ (van Dijck, 2014). It characterises *Analogue* and *Tacoma* as belonging to a subset of archival adventures which imagine technologically advanced futures in order to ask questions about datafication, subjectivity and the terms on which the past remains accessible in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> van Dijck defines ‘datafication’ as ‘the transformation of social action into online quantified data, thus allowing for real-time tracking and predictive analysis’ (van Dik, 2014, p.198).

The next section proposes that our understanding of how these games function and what they have to say can be enriched by a consideration of literary history. Offering a brief synopsis of ‘The Aspern Papers’, I show how this text from the 1900s reworks gothic tropes in ways that anticipate what Love and Fullbright are doing in the 2010s. Situating all three works in relation to longer-term generic traditions and cultural trends, I propose that today’s literary-ludic archival adventures should be understood as symptoms of what Scott Lash (2002) frames as the growing predominance of information over other ‘modes of cultural inscription’ such as narrative (p.134). Already in progress by the time of James’ text (which, as we shall see, is among other things a commentary on new approaches to gathering and disseminating biographical data), the struggle between narrative and information as competing modes of ordering reality continues to inform the perspectives on datafication and (post-)human subjectivity articulated in contemporary archival adventures.

Having established this framework for their analysis, I then address *Analogue* and *Tacoma* in turn, looking at how each dramatizes the ethical quandaries and philosophical dilemmas posed by new information technologies. The conclusion summarises what these texts have in common and where they diverge as responses to datafication.

## **Data and Discontent**

In *Programmed Visions* Wendy Chun (2011) looks back to the 1940s to show how the advent of the computer fostered dreams of ‘an all-encompassing archive’ that, by making the patterns underlying past events apprehensible, would enable us to ‘shape and to predict - and indeed embody - a future based on past data’ (pp.11, xii). While Chun shows these dreams to be ill-founded, their influence has only grown, and today the logic of ‘datafication’ is ubiquitous. As states and corporations compete and collaborate to amass ever-larger pools of data, discourses

of ‘dataism’ and ‘data philanthropy’ (van Dijck, 2014; Ajana, 2017, p.2) have arisen to offer a rationale for their activities, framing the collection, storage and dissemination of personal data as an ethical necessity and spreading the ‘morally inflected’ message that by participating in ‘shareveillance’ we are contributing to the greater good (Birchall, 2016, p.10).

But while billions of us still ‘accept the “sharing” of personal information - everything from marital status to colds, and from eating habits to favorite music - via social network sites or apps as the new norm’ (van Dijck, 2014, p.197), recent years have seen mounting concern over the terms on which such data are collected and put to use. Doxxings<sup>2</sup> and data breaches have exposed individuals to harassment, blackmail and fraud; whistleblowers and investigative journalists have revealed the extent of state surveillance programmes and the abuse of social networks’ user data for political ends; scholars have argued that algorithmic systems are entrenching inequality and amplifying racism (Noble, 2018).

As these developments have pushed questions of data capture and storage, privacy and identity to the forefront of the popular conversation, designers of literary-ludic videogames have responded using forms like the ‘walking simulator’ and the ‘desktop simulator’. Melissa Kagen (2018) has observed that many so-called ‘walking sims’ centre on the collation and analysis of biographical information, and I would argue that the very absence of digital technologies in games like *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2012) or *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) can be read as an implicit critique of datafication. In such games the act of gathering and perusing biographical artifacts (notebooks, cassette tapes, photographs) is presented as a means of giving a voice to the voiceless, promoting empathy and understanding, openness and

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<sup>2</sup> The publication of private documents such as home addresses and financial details online as a form of harassment.

transparency – and, as such, a more benign and humane alternative to the reduction of individual lives to abstract demographic data.

Kagen proposes that we might do better to describe such games as ‘archival adventures’ – a term also applicable to ‘desktop simulators’ or ‘interface games’ like *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens, 2017) and *Cibele* (Star Maid Games, 2015), in which players are afforded a user’s-eye view of digital devices housing intimate personal data. *Analogue* and *Tacoma* also ask players to engage with digital biographical archives, but imagine how personal information might be captured, shared, stored and mobilised tomorrow, grounding their accounts of datafication and identity in futuristic storyworlds where cryogenic stasis, interplanetary travel and artificial intelligence have all become realities.

Even as they look forward, however, these games also look back to the conventions of eighteenth-century gothic romances, in which intrepid protagonists piece together the past by exploring spaces scattered with documentary fragments. While *Tacoma*, in particular, makes use of expressive resources peculiar to the digital era, placing us within navigable three-dimensional environments that employ sophisticated ‘spatial storytelling’ techniques (Jenkins, 2004), it also underlines how much archival adventures often owe to notions of plotting and characterisation inherited from literature. It is for this reason that Henry James’ ‘The Aspern Papers’ provides an instructive point of comparison. Admittedly, the juxtaposition of James’ text with these science fiction-themed archival adventures might seem counterintuitive – would not, say, *Gone Home* be a closer equivalent? Insofar as it speaks to the influence of then-nascent media technologies on understandings of privacy, identity and subjectivity, however, ‘The Aspern Papers’ offers a revealing counterpoint to *Analogue* and *Tacoma* – especially when we take into account the important part played by gender and sexuality in all three texts.

## **‘The Aspern Papers’ and the Prehistory of the Walking Sim**

‘The Aspern Papers’ revolves around the figure of Jeffrey Aspern, a kind of ‘American Byron’ (James, 2000 [1908], p.xxxiii). While Aspern has been dead for decades by the time the tale begins, his erstwhile mistress Juliana Bordereau is still alive and living in Venice with her niece Tina. The novella’s narrator - a literary editor with an almost obsessive interest in Aspern – becomes convinced that Julianna possesses papers that would shed light on the poet’s life and work. Determined to lay his hands on them, he poses as a lodger to gain access to the household. Julianna frustrates his schemes, however, and he is ultimately reduced to sneaking into her chamber and ‘ransack[ing her] drawers’ (ibid. p.15).<sup>3</sup> When Julianna catches him in the act she suffers a fatal fit, and the narrator flees. Tina, however, heavily implies that she is willing both to forgive him and to grant him access to the papers - on the condition that he marry her. When he rejects her overture she consigns the documents to the fire. If all of James’ fiction owes a debt to gothic literature (Banta, 1996, p.52), that debt is particularly pronounced here. With its decaying Italian palazzo harbouring dark secrets, ‘The Aspern Papers’ wryly harks back to eighteenth-century texts like the phenomenally successful *Mysteries of Udolpho* (Radcliffe, 1794). Compelled to infiltrate the Bordereau household in search of the literary remains of his hero, the novella’s narrator is a travesty of *Udolpho*’s Emily, the orphan who is kept captive in a crumbling castle by a diabolical nobleman, and whose ‘curiosity’ makes her an ‘archetypical wife of Bluebeard’ (Bauer, 2016, p.61), bravely scouring the castle for documentary evidence that will bring to light the skeletons lurking in her family closet.

*Udolpho* came at the end of a century that had seen the novel becoming a powerful cultural force, one that critics have argued simultaneously reflected and helped to effect dramatic shifts in the nature and understanding of human subjectivity, much as videogames are doing

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<sup>3</sup> The sexual connotation has not been lost on critics.

today. Ian Watt (2001 [1957]) posits a connection between the novel's rise to prominence and 'refinements of domestic privacy' which meant that 'every member of the family... could be alone whenever they wished' (p.188). For him, the emergence of spaces where individuals could spend time alone reading and writing – giving expression to their 'inner lives' and/or reading accounts of others' thoughts and feelings – played a crucial role in consolidating new conceptions of the self, helping to cement the notion of the autonomous individual subject possessed of psychological 'depth'. While the validity of this model still seems self-evident to many today, Lash (2002) reminds us that it is 'quintessentially modern', rooted in tenets of Enlightenment humanism that took a long time to trickle into the popular consciousness (p.132) - and which, as Sylvia Wynter notes, were only ever extended to 'one restricted portion of humanity' who continued to view 'a large majority of the peoples of the earth' as less-than-human (Scott, 2000, p.194). Moreover, by the late nineteenth-century Lash contends that *narrative* was already giving way to *information* as Western culture's dominant form of 'cultural inscription', putting the model of the subject so seductively bodied forth in novels like James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) under strain and preparing the way for the biographical individual's metamorphosis into the datafied 'dividual' (Lash, 2002, pp.130-137; Deleuze, 1992, p.7).

From this perspective contemporary debates over the rights and wrongs of digital 'datafication' can be seen as part of a profound epistemological reorientation that was already well underway by the time James was reworking 'The Aspern Papers'. From the photographic mug shot to the illustrated magazine interview, Marconi's experiments in wireless telegraphy to the electromechanical tabulating machines used to conduct the 1890 US census, new technologies were reformulating understandings of the personal and the public, information and identity. 1890s urban gothic texts like *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897) would put 'phonographs and typewriters, autopsies and newspaper reports' (Kittler, 1997, p.56) centre stage, pushing the

convention of the gothic narrative as patchwork of ‘textual fragment[s]’ (Wolfreys and Robbins, 2000, p.xix) to new extremes in reaction to the unprecedented volumes of information being generated by fin-de-siècle societies. In texts like Wilde’s *Portrait of Doran Gray* (1890), meanwhile, the gothic preoccupation with locked rooms and sordid secrets assumed a distinctly queer tinge, reflecting a mounting ‘crisis of homo/heterosexual definition’ stoked by a series of scandals that would culminate in Wilde’s own 1895 conviction for gross indecency, reshaping understandings ‘of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine... [and] urbane/provincial’ (Sedgwick, 2008 [1990], p.11).

These contexts are crucial for understanding the ‘The Aspern Papers’ – and, I would argue, contemporary archival adventure games. In the preface to his revised version of the novella (included in the lavish New York edition of his works, intended to ‘represent him after his death’ (Brown, 1991, p.264)), James reveals its basis in gossip concerning Byron’s mistress Jane Clairmont, who passed her later years in seclusion in Florence (James, 2000 [1908], p.xxx). James delights in the idea of this emissary of ‘a palpable imaginable visitable past’ living on into an era not her own (ibid. p.xxxi). He insists, however, that he personally ‘would not have disturbed Clairmont’s privacy’ – not least because, as a ‘man of imagination’, he knows that nothing she could have told him would have lived up to his idea of the secrets she *might* have possessed (ibid. p.xxix). For while ‘[t]he historian, essentially, wants more documents than he can really use’, James is a dramatist, and ‘the dramatist only wants more liberties than he can really take’ (ibid.). Anecdotes about Clairmont were ‘enough to give me my “facts”, bare facts of intimation; which, scant handful though they were, were more distinct and more numerous than I like facts’ – after all, ‘nine tenths of the artist’s interest in [facts] is that of what he shall add to them and how he shall turn them’ (ibid. xxx). It is perhaps for this reason that James’ plots often hinge on circumstances that would have seemed tawdry or scandalous if described bluntly



(illegitimate children, extramarital affairs, custody battles, queer secrets), as if he is testing his own ability to transmute unpalatable ‘facts’ into edifying art.

The preface establishes a hierarchy which sets narrative artists like James above mere information-mongers, while implying that his is a dying breed. With his reference to ‘a surviving unexplored unparagraphed Julianna’ (ibid. xxxi) James gesture towards the ‘new culture of publicity’ that was evolving in step with ‘new systems of information circulation’ in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Roach, 2018, pp.48, 57). The mistress of a famously licentious poet would never, James laments, remain in an ‘uninvaded and uninterviewed state’ of ‘fortunate privacy’ today (James, 2000 [1908], p.xxxi). ‘The Aspern Papers’ is just ‘one of a number of tales published [by James] in the 1890 and 1900s’ which ‘explores issues of secrecy and publicity, blackmail, scandal, [and] fear of exposure’ (Stevens, 2008, p.148), many of them centred on figures who deal professionally in information - journalists, editors, biographers, telegraph operators. For Cutting (2005), its moral is simple: ‘it is *better to be forgotten than mediatised*’ (p.160, emphasis in original).

James’ perspective on these issues was hardly disinterested. The 1908 version of ‘The Aspern Papers’ is the work of an ageing author especially ‘sensitive... about the whole issue of what would happen to his private – and professional – life after he was dead and could no longer control the public’s study of it (or the publishing world’s access to it)’ (Brown, 1991, p.277), and in the wake of the New York edition’s commercial failure James destroyed much of his own archive. Undeniably ‘resonant with [his] fictional poetics’ (Savoy, 2010, p.63), this act has inevitably coloured readings of ‘The Aspern Papers’ (which frequently ‘conflate’ Aspern’s literary remains with James’ (Tsimpouki, 2018, p.169)). As it turned out, by burning these materials James was unwittingly facilitating his reinvention as a queer literary icon (Salvoy 2010, p.63). Sharing James’ preference for suggestive ‘intimation[s]’ over brute facts, critics like

Michael Moon and novelists like Colm Toibin have teased a queer James out from between the lines of his famously opaque prose and what remains of his biographical archive. Laconic though it is, this archive provides ample grist to the queer mill, especially when read alongside an oeuvre replete with relationships as intense as a they are antithetical to heterosexual norms - the narrator's passionate devotion to Aspern (who seems to speak to him from beyond the grave, counselling him to 'Get out of it as you can, my dear fellow' when the prospect of marrying Tina arises (James, 2000 [1908], p.89)) being just one example.

Even so, queer readings of James' life and work beg the question of where legitimate scholarship shades into the 'violation of artistic and moral integrity' (the charge Brown (1991) levels against the novella's narrator (p.272)). James' fiction and his fate as a biographical subject ask us to consider the circumstances under which it is permissible to collect, circulate and interpret (not to mention erase) auto/biographical information. Such questions have long preoccupied computer scientists like Liam Bannon (who worries that we have become so intoxicated by the 'power of the computer to store and archive everything', its massive 'augmentation of human remembering', that we have 'neglect[ed] to consider what augmentation might mean when it comes to forgetting' (2006, pp.11, 5)), and they have also become central to contemporary literary-ludic archival adventures. As a work of 'pseudobiographical fiction', 'centr[ing] on an imaginary biographical subject, and thematis[ing] processes of biographical research' (ní Dhúill, 2012, pp.286-7), 'The Aspern Papers' anticipates the scenarios of games like *Gone Home* and *Edith Finch*, while its reflexive foregrounding of author/reader and biographer/subject relationships prefigures Davey Wreden's work in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2011) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015). Helping us to understand where such titles sit in relation to the tradition of gothic games - from *Mystery House* (On-Line Systems, 1980) to *Resident Evil 7* (Capcom, 2017) - with which they are in

dialogue,<sup>4</sup> James' novella shows that concerns over 'new' media and the relationship between identity and information have a longer and more complex history than we might suppose. Moreover, where the engagement with questions of gender and sexuality in walking sims like *Gone Home* has been criticised by reactionary gamers as an example of how ready game developers are to pander to contemporary standards of 'political correctness' (Mortensen, 2018, p.794), 'The Aspern Papers' highlights just how deeply these concerns are woven into the generic matrix from which these literary-ludic forms have emerged, reflecting the heightened urgency that questions of secrecy and privacy have historically assumed for queer and gender nonconforming subjects.

### *Analogue: A Hate Story*

Having provided a lens on the prehistory of the literary-ludic archival adventure, I want to turn now to my first example of the form. Much like Christine Love's earlier games, *Analogue* is both a visual novel and an 'interface game', wherein the player sees on their screen what the protagonist sees on theirs. That protagonist has been hired by the Saeju Colony Historical Society to recover documents from the Mugunghwa, a starship that has been drifting in space for centuries. *Analogue*, then, shares with 'The Aspern Papers' an interest in recovering and retelling stories that would otherwise be lost. Here the materiality of memory is dramatized through the story of Hyun-ae, who twice uses technology to cheat death and 'save' herself. As we decrypt messages and journal entries stored in the Mugunghwa's memory banks we learn that Hyun-ae fell prey to an untreatable illness and was placed in cryo-sleep until a cure could be found. She awakens, however, to a society that has regressed into a state of atavistic technological illiteracy, governed by a repressive all-male ruling class who have stripped women of their rights. Like

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<sup>4</sup> On gothic games see Krzywinska (2016).

James' Julianna, Hyun-ae becomes a living relic, out of step with her surroundings. When a catastrophic systems failure threatens this culture, she manages to save herself again, this time by merging her consciousness with the ship's artificial intelligence.

*Analogue* draws on historical accounts of Korea's Joseon era (1392-1897), which saw rights and freedoms women had enjoyed under the previous regime curtailed. The game decries the erasure of women's lives and men's abuses of power from the historical record; as Hyun-ae tells us, the Mugunghwa's 'official genealogies don't list women' and 'it's traditional for women's letters to be deleted after being read, so the disk space can be reallocated'. When Hyun-ae rebels against patriarchal oppression her tongue is cut out, a distinctly gothic narrative conceit that equates loss of language and loss of history, the suppression of women's biographies and the mutilation of their bodies.

At the same time, *Analogue* questions how far we can hold other cultures to our own standards, foregrounding the cultural specificity of knowledge. Discussing Joseon society, Love has said that she 'couldn't imagine living in a time like that' because 'from a modern perspective, it's so horribly dehumanizing it seems like it'd be a fate worse than death'; precisely for this reason she was interested in 'trying to get into the heads' of 'men and women who have internalized all these awful misogynist ideals and take them completely for granted' (JP, 2011). Halfway through the game players meet another AI, the pugnacious, unabashedly misogynistic Mute, who contests Hyun-ae's account of the Mugunghwa's history. Showing us files Hyun-ae had kept off limits, Mute gleefully reveals that it was Hyun-ae herself who triggered the event that wiped out the ship's population. While players can gain a fuller sense of what really happened over multiple playthroughs (and by playing the sequel *Hate Plus* (Love, 2013a), which is set after *Analogue* but hinges on documents from an earlier phase in the Mugunghwa's history), it is impossible to see all the files in any single run; due to limited storage space it is

also impossible to back up both AIs and bring them with us.<sup>5</sup> Literalising the notion of a datafied self, the transhumanist fantasy of copying one's consciousness to a computer has been critiqued by posthumanists for its narcissistic fetishization of 'disembodiment and autonomy' (Wolfe, 2010, p.xv). In *Analogue* it serves to foreground questions of archival ethics, as Love forces players to choose who to side with and who to 'save' – a verb that encompasses both rescuing and recording. Like Chun's (2011) work, which historicizes and interrogates the presumption that computers will usher in a more unified and enlightened future by widening access to 'an ever-increasing archive in which no piece of data is lost' (97), *Analogue* skewers progressive complacency, insisting that access to an exhaustive digital archive won't, in its own right, prevent regression, factionalism and cultural amnesia. As Hyun-ae laments in a journal entry, 'why did my father... think that people would be smarter in the future'?

### ***Tacoma***

*Tacoma* essentially fleshes Love's visual novel out into first-person 3D exploration game. We play as a contractor hired by the Venturis corporation to investigate what has happened on the seemingly abandoned space station Tacoma and recover any data pertaining to the incident – another figure responsible for collating biographical information. As in *Gone Home*, this entails poring over photos, books and handwritten notes. The year being 2088, however, it also entails viewing holographic augmented reality recordings, wherein spectral representations of the crew replay scenes from the station's past. Players move around Tacoma viewing, pausing and

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<sup>5</sup> There is a secret ending where both AIs are saved, but it is played for laughs and considered 'canonically impossible' by Love (Love, 2013b).

rewinding these sequences as they piece together what happened, while learning more about the personalities, relationships, and histories of the cast.

We soon discover that Venturis elicits obedience via exploitative, debt-based ‘loyalty’ schemes and restrictive contracts, and is delegating authority to AIs in the attempt to cut costs. If Tacoma’s crew is demographically diverse, it also comprises employees who are, for one reason or another, considered expendable, suggesting that women, queers and people of colour remain disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in the future Fullbright imagines. It gradually becomes apparent that Venturis is trying to hush up what happened on Tacoma, erasing evidence and spinning the narrative to their advantage. It also emerges, however, that our character is not a dutiful contractor but an activist working undercover. Like Snowden, she turns whistleblower, sharing evidence of Venturis’ crimes and liberating the station’s AI.

*Tacoma*, then, is very much preoccupied with labour politics and the ethical quandaries posed by datafication. Venturis’ recordings of the crew are presented as invasive - as, arguably, is our own inspection of their personal messages and possessions. But these same recordings allow us to determine what really happened, attesting to the humanity of Tacoma’s workers and the inhumanity of their employers. Datafication is a double-edged sword here, a tool of oppression, but also a means of holding the powerful to account. Unfortunately, the game’s treatment of these issues remains rather dualistic. Where the evil corporation hoards data to entrench their power, then tries to erase incriminating evidence when their narrative is threatened, our character is driven to uncover the truth in service of the marginalized and silenced. There is a tension here, as players are asked to violate the privacy of particular characters in order to affirm an abstract ideal of privacy. And while the game’s calls for corporate accountability and individual privacy are forceful and emotive, Claire Birchall’s (2016) work on ‘shareveillance’ suggests they are also a little nostalgic and naïve. For Birchall

privacy is already an anachronism – or, as her sci-fi metaphor has it, ‘like the light we see from an already dead star’ (p.6). She argues moreover that ‘to call on the right to privacy is to frame the debate in terms of an individual’s right to limit the access other people, the state, or other commercial entities might have to her “content” (data, thoughts, feelings, information, communications)’ – a misguided strategy that ‘reinforces a sense of a self that lives in political isolation’ and ultimately falls under ‘the apolitical shadows of individualism’ (ibid. p.7).

This might seem a strange charge to level at a game concerned with unionization, solidarity and teamwork. It is telling, though, that *Tacoma* places so much emphasis on scenes showing individual crew members in the privacy of their own cabins. Affording glimpses of the characters’ intimate relationships and turbulent inner lives, these tableaux evoke Watts’ analysis of domestic bedrooms and closets as both *enabling conditions* and *privileged metaphors* for the psychic interiority of the ‘deep’ individual who is most fully herself when alone, signaling *Tacoma*’s attachment to a decidedly traditional - and rather sentimental – form of humanism. If Venturis is evil, the game suggests, it is because the corporation refuses to recognise that there are aspects of our identities and our biographies that are too special to be reduced to statistics and too personal to be shared indiscriminately. While *Tacoma*’s critique of corporate surveillance is timely, then, it is also flawed, arguably reinforcing both ‘the dominant, morally inflected imperative to share or connect with others in a network through a confessional communicative style’ and the idea that greater transparency can, in and of itself, solve the problems datafication poses (Birchall, 2016, p.3).

Drawing on Glissant, Birchall suggests that rather than affirming the sacredness of privacy or the need for transparency, we should be demanding the ‘right to opacity’ (ibid. 2). Where *Tacoma* seeks to cultivate compassion through intimate glimpses of individual lives, a politics of opacity insists that we should not have to bare our souls – or share our data - to count

politically. Rights shouldn't depend on our being relatable, or even legible. *Tacoma* comes close to implying that if only exploiters and bigots could see how their victims lived, they would be forced to acknowledge their common humanity – the dubious premise underpinning conceptions of gameplay as a kind of immersive 'empathy tourism' (Pozo, 2018). While the game rightly highlights the need for marginalised communities to be represented and given a voice, it has less to say about the terms on which these are granted in a world where, as Galloway (2012) cautions, '[t]he question' is no longer 'can the subaltern speak' but how to deal with 'new global networks of technicity' within which 'the subaltern.... is forced to speak' in order to generate value for the owners of an 'algorithm [that] listens' (p.128), potentially exposing herself to exploitation and violence in the process. While Fullbright's portrayal of a heroic protagonist bearing witness to experiences under threat of erasure gestures towards these complexities, *Tacoma* ultimately shies away from an in-depth engagement with them.

Love arguably fares better. Without resorting to relativism, *Analogue* is willing to acknowledge the inevitability of epistemological gaps, mixed motives, contradictory evidence and conflicting interpretations, and to address how understandings of identity, privacy, morality and political expediency shift over time. Where *Tacoma* nudges players towards cathartic truths, Love leaves us at the mercy of two unreliable intermediaries and, borrowing ideas from the dating sim genre, literally asks us to pick a side. It is not just Mute and Hyun-ae who prove hard to read, moreover; she also gives us more leeway to imagine a player-character who is manipulative, prurient, vain, selfish, naïve, or just a jobsworth. Where *Tacoma*'s crew are, for all their foibles and failings, ultimately lovable, Mute and Hyun-ae alike are guilty of appalling acts each considers justified. And where *Tacoma*'s conclusion confirms that the player-character is a hero, reassuring players that their scrutiny of the crew's private lives was entirely legitimate, Love, like James, insists that navigating the archive and retelling history will always raise ethical



questions – especially when, as in *Analogue*, we are dealing with ‘difficult knowledge’ concerning mass violence and trauma (Britzman, 1998, p.118). Like ‘The Aspern Papers’ *Analogue* shows that ‘archivists are not neutral observers’, that ‘the process of archiving renders them actors in the plot and implicates them in a narrative that is as much about the burying and erasing of memory as it is about its preservation’ (Tsimpouki, 2018, p.171).

Reading *Analogue* through the lens of ‘The Aspern Papers’ offers a corrective to the tendency among archival adventures to represent the act of collecting biographical data as an uncomplicatedly positive means of fostering compassion, tolerance, understanding and historical insight. Both James’ novella and Love’s game insist that this is not necessarily so. The antihero of ‘The Aspern Papers’ is an archival adventurer who believes his intense attachment to a dead man gives him license to deceive, violate the privacy of, and ultimately attempt to burgle two living women; where Fullbright’s games have (commendably, given the dearth of queer representation in gaming culture) offered positive portrayals of same-sex relationships flourishing in inimical circumstances, James’ diagramming of the skeins of desire, greed, identification, suspicion and kinship that tie Julianna, Aspern, Tina, and the narrator together represents a less edifying vision of queer relationship – one that foreshadows the fraught dynamics of *Analogue*’s Hyun-ae-Mute-player triangle.

## Conclusion

In *Tacoma* and *Analogue* the ‘mechropolitical’ - the terms on which videogames ‘determine who may live and who may die and in what manner’ (Phillips, 2015, p.2) - shades into the mnemopolitical, as we assume the roles of player-characters charged with determining who will be remembered, how and by whom. In grappling with these issues we could do worse

than look to literary history. Where archival adventure games tend to portray the labour of bringing buried truths and forgotten lives to light as noble, texts like ‘The Aspern Papers’ complicate this assumption, suggesting that there may be instances where deletion and ‘judicious forgetting’ are preferable to the endless, indiscriminate expansion of the archive (Bannon, 2006, p.4). Savoy (2010) argues that while James often portrays the destruction of biographical data ‘as a kind of purification[,] free[ing] the protagonists from morally dubious encumbrances’ (pp.63-4), ‘The Aspern Papers’ is more equivocal, reflecting the dilemmas posed by James’ destruction of his own archive, an act perhaps legible in terms of ‘closetedness, a lack of truthfulness-to-onself and a crippling complicity with homophobia’, but equally legible in terms of James enacting ‘strategies of opacity’ that seem newly relevant in an age of digital surveillance and datafication (de Villiers, 2012, pp.2-3). *Analogue* and *Tacoma* tackle similar quandaries, and neither offers easy answers. *Analogue* decries the silencing of disempowered populations but also challenges rhetorics of ‘dataism’, interrogating the pervasive metaphor of ‘computer storage as memory’ (Chun, 2011, p.157) while insisting that exhaustive digital archives will not, on their own, result in an enlightened and progressive consensus. Hyun-ae’s attempts to highlight historical injustices are compelling, but start to seem decidedly hypocritical when Mute reveals what she has been hiding. *Tacoma*, meanwhile, offers a timely riposte to corporate misuse of personal information, but, by grounding its critique in emotive glimpses of sympathetic characters’ private lives, arguably reinforces the logic underpinning systems of ‘shareveillance’ (Birchall, 2016).

Cultural critics have addressed the important role fictional forms have played in incubating new ‘genres of being human’ (Scott, 2000, p.186), noting that by portraying the development of psychologically complex characters, the realist novel, for example, was instrumental in propagating the idea of the autonomous individual subject with a rich interior

life. Today's literary-ludic archival adventures recast questions of identity and subjectivity for societies that are renegotiating the complex legacies of humanism in light of new technologies that sometimes 'challenge the liberal subject' and sometimes 'enforce it, by continuing the practices that have given liberalism a bad name' (Matzner, 2019, p.7). Hyun-ae's determination to 'save' herself might look admirable from certain perspectives, but can also be seen as exemplifying transhumanism's technologically-facilitated 'intensification' of dubious 'fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism' (Wolfe, 2010, p.xiv); *Tacoma* apparently wants to make good on the putative universality of liberal humanism by extending rights and recognition to hitherto excluded groups – whether they be sexual minorities or AIs.

In their modes of dramatizing these ideas *Analogue* and *Tacoma* show that games owe much to, and can still learn from, their literary forebears. But they also demonstrate how narrative videogames are finding novel (rather than just novelistic) ways to chart changing conceptions of identity and subjectivity. With its hologram-haunted virtual spaces, *Tacoma* constitutes a kind of 'visitable past' quite different from anything James could have imagined, while *Analogue* apes digital archives' interfaces and draws on dating sims to stress the role of identification and desire in colouring perspectives on the past. Here the terms on which these games, as software applications, record and retrieve data becomes a part of how, as a literary-ludic disquisitions on identity, mediation and cultural memory, they interrogate our obsession with information.

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