

Decaying Plastic Play: Flappy Bird's Hacked Afterlife as Media Archaeological Praxis

On March 28th, 2016, prolific YouTube streamer SethBling posted a video demonstrating how, using only timed button presses and graphical glitches present in the console original, he injected three hundred and thirty-one new bytes into the seminal 1990 Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) platforming game *Super Mario World*—bytes corresponding to the 2013 viral iPhone game phenomenon *Flappy Bird*. The hack allows users to play a fully functional port of *Flappy Bird* within *Super Mario World*, grafting the former's computational logic into the latter's graphics. The choice of game here is striking: while *Super Mario World* has been re-released across a variety of hardware platforms—to say nothing of Mario's cultural ubiquity—*Flappy Bird* remains fascinating for its inaccessibility, both in its frustratingly difficult level design and the fact that in February 2014, its creator Nguyen Ha Dong pulled it from all platforms, citing concerns that its addictiveness ruined people's lives. SethBling's hack then produces a chimeric object; a hybrid of plastic logic, and time; the ghost of one game haunting the shell of another.

This hack is ripe for media archaeological investigation on a number of levels, not the least for how it operates as a media archaeological critique in and of itself. Its haunting constitutes a “circuit bending” familiar to artistic traditions of remix, tinkering, and collage as well as how these practices intersect with the kinds of media archaeological praxis that Jussi Parikka and Garnet Hertz outline in their essay “Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method.” Doing double duty as preparation for presentation a version of this project at *Digital Humanities 2017* here in Montréal this August, my

afternoon work for this class will investigate a number of hands-on approaches to engaging and critiquing this hack. What hardware affordances encourage and delimit these kinds of performances? In trying to reproduce this hack, or to create new ones, what can we learn about the labor that goes into such work? What conceptual tensions emerge between doing such work on an original console versus in an emulator? I'm particularly interested in how this hack points towards ecological and material circulations, as the supposed immanence of software gets concretized in a physical hardware "performance" of sorts, one that plays as well with ideas of rarity, scarcity, and how computational objects leave or enter the cultural field in different configurations.