When We Can’t Play, Wii Emulate: A Critical Investigation into the Politics and Uses of Softmodding a Nintendo Wii

Last February, Nintendo launched *Fire Emblem Heroes*, a highly anticipated mobile spin-off of the *Fire Emblem* series for Android and iOS. Framed as a free-to-play “catch-them-all” tactical role playing game, *Fire Emblem Heroes* features collectible avatars of main and supporting characters from eleven games in the canonical series, strategically offering Nintendo and Intelligent Systems an additional platform not only to advertise their upcoming installment for the 3DS but also to rekindle interest in earlier games. While intrigued gamers can purchase the most recent 3DS titles online or at any local games store, what happens when such an audience is drawn to a character from a title that ceased to be produced decades ago? What happens when new international fans wish to play a game that has never been officially released outside Japan? The answer, more often than not, is emulation.

To complete the afternoon project requirement, I propose to document the process of softmodding a Nintendo Wii while interrogating what uses such an emulator might have in an academic context. In conjunction with the documentation of the softmodding process, I pose a number of questions about the ethics of video game piracy and the blurring between consumer and user: are there ways in which loading ROMs onto an emulator can constitute fair dealing? Is there an ethical difference between downloading a game you have not purchased and downloading a game you *have* purchased, but simply cannot play due to hardware malfunctions such as a scratched disk or

the Wii’s ubiquitous “Disk Read Error”? Does the individual who disseminates a video game as a ROM possess an author function?

The practical project investigates how new online technologies can enable consumers to control and engage with video game software and hardware with unprecedented ease, and how piratic media practices can be used as a socio-political critique of the planned obsolescence of recently released video game consoles. Consequently, I will also undertake a critical analysis of what a transformative use of a game may consist of, in part by looking at homebrew applications and hacked games. The ultimate goal of this project is to rethink the transformative potential of the Wii emulator, as well as consider ways in which it can operate not only as an archive for out-of-print and backup games but also as a digital archive in itself.