

# (Un)Controlled Vocabulary

*This post was written by Alex Custodio and Michael Iantorno as part of their ongoing research work at the Residual Media Depot.*

In October 2020, in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, we decided to begin our long-anticipated cataloguing of the Residual Media Depot. The Depot's status as an active research collection makes it challenging to document, since the collection seldom remains static for more than a few days at a time. However, with no possibility of taking our workshops to classrooms or even other universities, the lockdown has provided a morbidly ideal time to embark on our efforts to catalog the sheer amount of objects we have.

Our initial foray into cataloguing has focused on home videogame consoles, primarily those that were produced in the seventies and eighties, including a range of early devices from Magnavox, Atari, and others. This segment of the Depot's collection represents a period in time when videogame consoles were only just becoming household fixtures. Our current sample consists of over 400 individual objects contained within 50 boxes, each represented by a unique accession number.



Sticky-notes have proven to be a valuable (albeit temporary) archival tool.

Our goal for this project is twofold. First, we wish to create an easily accessible database of the items in the Residual Media Depot. Second, we are developing a controlled vocabulary for early videogame consoles that is useful for scholars and hobbyists working with and writing about these objects. These outcomes are designed to make our collection more accessible both for researchers at Concordia and for scholars accessing our work remotely.

This blog post is a reflection on the challenges this project has faced during the first few months of documentation, which has focused mainly on developing a controlled vocabulary for names, inputs, connections, and other descriptive data. The cataloguing team consists of Alex Custodio, who has been spearheading the development of the database, and Michael Iantorno, who has been handling the material aspects of the documentation process.

## What's My Name Again?

The initial stumbling block we encountered when we set out to database the Depot's collection centered around naming. Many of the early consoles we encountered in the collection lacked internal consistency between the names on the console, box, and owner's manual. Some systems had consistent branding at the time of its release, but eventually took on alternative or additional names due to several factors, including manufacturer's rebranding strategies, scholars' historicization of the objects, or contemporary users' reimagining of the system through playing, hacking, and modding.

One of our first tasks with this project was to reconcile these inconsistencies in order to establish clear, consistent vocabulary around names. Who decides what a console is called? To answer this questions, we identified three stakeholders whose contributions inform the way we think about a given piece of hardware:

- **Industry:** The corporate strategies that may or may not have been consistent in how they initially branded the system. We can determine what the industry's name for a system was through the technology itself (the name on the console, the codename printed on the circuit board) and its paratexts (the box in which it came, the owner's manual packaged with it, the advertisements used to sell it, etc.). This is important because we want our scholarship to be grounded in evidence that is as precise as possible, but the materiality of those objects often works against that desire for precision.
- **Users:** The collective discourses that say some names are "true" or "authentic" based on individual histories with the technologies. Alternatively, the folksonomies that arise through communities of hackers, hobbyists, and modders.

- **Scholars:** The academic discourses that frame scholarly approaches to technology, rooted in game studies, library science, and archival work. Scholars may have different reasons for naming or valorizing certain technologies over others based on what they study and how they approach it. We see this in naming projects like the GAMECIP in which only the most commercially successful consoles have controlled vocabularies.

Occasionally, these discourses conflict with each other. We see this most clearly with the Atari Video Computer System, whose name is the subject of debate even among the members of our research team. Atari released their flagship home videogame console as the VCS in 1977, but they later rebranded the system as the Atari 2600 in 1982 after settling on a naming strategy for subsequent consoles. This shift in the industry has resulted in different priorities between the GAMECIP vocabulary (Atari 2600) and the MIT Press' platform studies series preferred name (Atari VCS). All this is before we even factor in folksonomies that emerge in hobbyist communities, where fans distinguish between individual models, such as: the "heavy sixer" VCS produced in Sunnyvale, California; the "light sixer" manufactured in Hong Kong with a thinner plastic; the "Vader" encased in black plastic with four switches; and so on.

So, our first question turned into three: How do we recognize changes over time? How do we address hobbyist nomenclature? And is it even possible or productive to reconcile this fluidity?

## **Unexceptional Consoles**

There are numerous stakeholders at play with differing perspectives about how particular videogame consoles should be named. But what if a piece of technology has not gained enough of a following for these debates to arise in the first place? Writing about what platform studies stands to gain from media-

archaeological methods, Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka note that platform scholars, game researchers, and fan communities are often guilty of focusing on technologies that are either resounding successes (such as the Atari 2600 or the SNES/SFC) or intriguing failures (such as the Virtual Boy or Sega Dreamcast).<sup>1</sup> Media companies will often magnify these trends through remakes and re-releases of past successes, further fleshing out already well-populated platform archives. What is left out of these discussions, however, is a middle-ground of *unexceptional technology* – devices that have been relatively uncelebrated by either the general public or the academy and often fall out of the standard canon of game history.

What Apperley and Parikka argue for platforms has analogs in other fields, including literary studies, film studies, and comics studies. In a useful article on typical comics, for instance, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo observe that most of the comics that academics research are atypical in that only a select few are amenable to scholarly study. They argue that, although academics may not have the cultural capital to select the objects that appear in that canon, we do have enough to reify the choices of the marketplace if we decide to focus our study on those objects and to exclude others from our consideration. This means that if we want to build our analyses on primary data, we need to give more thought to how we select our objects of study, and what methods we employ.<sup>2</sup>

In the Depot collection, we find several kinds of unexceptional consoles. First, there are those that were neither commercial successes nor objects of critical veneration. This category includes not only flops and failures like the RCA Studio II (we have two in the Depot; one works, sometimes), but also innovative technologies, because this is where the work of startups appears. The Magnavox Odyssey 500, for example, is generic in appearance, especially when compared to its beautifully designed predecessors (the 100 and 300), but features some of the first human-shaped avatars to

appear on a home videogame system.



A close-up on the (somewhat weathered) box art for the RCA Studio II videogame console.

A second kind is technologies that, while commercially successful, were not critical successes. These sorts of objects are often particularly difficult for academics to assess because their mundane qualities make them blend in rather than stand out ... and we are trained to like things that stand out. This is where we would locate objects in the Depot like the Coleco Telstar – a putty-coloured Pong clone that sold for about half the price of comparable Sears and Atari devices and has documented sales of over a million units.. For both the purposes of our own specific case studies, and in order to articulate the implications of such case studies for the larger field of video game studies, we need to develop methods that will allow us to detail the significance of such

objects without simply adding them to the platform canon.

When fans, scholars, and even the original developers lose interest in a technology, such devices are under-documented, understudied, and relegated to mere footnotes in discussions of allegedly more compelling devices. In the context of cataloging, this creates difficulties in determining what we can say about a videogame console, including its purpose, technological assemblage, or even its name. This is particularly difficult to parse when considering the rapid serialization of videogame consoles in the seventies and eighties, when several devices with similar or identical names were released in rapid succession.

At the time, some companies were more concerned with fitting as many buzzwords into their marketing as possible with little thought for consistency. RadioShack, for instance, released a series of Electronic TV Scoreboard devices that, while varying greatly in form, were named nearly identically to one another. To further complicate matters, the labelling on the box, manual, and system often differ in ways that, while slight, stymie the cataloging project. One system carries the name Full-Color TV Scoreboard on its faux-wood casing while the box declares that it's a Electronic TV Scoreboard and the manual that it's a Color TV Scoreboard.



One of many “TV Scoreboard” consoles that make up the Depot’s collection.

When we encounter devices without distinct names, or even folksonomies developed by dedicated fans, we are faced with a choice. We can either choose to default to the name-at-release, resigning ourselves to a certain amount of ambiguity between iterations, or develop our own moniker for the device, engaging in a sort of academic claim-staking. These naming woes extend even to the smallest aspects of these technologies, where determining the name or make of a particular cable can become a herculean task. One of our questions is, what would it take to correct these omissions, and how could we do so without simply canonizing the devices? Our hypothesis is that working closely with material research collections could be key to developing a different approach. Thus, unexceptionalism is simultaneously an intriguing theoretical lens when working through the Residual Media Depot’s catalog and an enormous barrier to forming a

consistent controlled vocabulary.

## **Functionality and Future Developments**

The challenges posed by contested naming conventions and the obscurity of unexceptional technologies beg the question: why is documenting the Depot in this manner even useful? At the very least, this cataloguing project is valuable to us as both an organizational tool and a means to interrogate the collection. Our work to date has already brought forth productive conversations on how the Depot is organized, how technologies are grouped by temporality and use, and how we intake and group new additions to the collection.

Of course, our intent is not to keep this research to ourselves. The creation of a controlled vocabulary allows us to tie our research into broader academic discussions on platforms, naming conventions, and access, while making the collection more accessible to scholars at Concordia. Due to space constraints at the university and our determination to preserve all available paratexts (including the original boxes), it is impossible to take in the full scope of the collection simply by looking at the shelves. The database will reveal technical specifications and descriptive data about boxed accessions that may not be apparent at first glance, easing the difficulties of sifting through an unlabelled collection of fully boxed technology.

Additionally, our database will aggregate information that is currently spread out across existing academic resources, numerous fan and hobbyist websites, and within the physical objects in the collection themselves. Although little of the information we are presenting is entirely new or unique, the ability to quickly find and compare anything from console technical specifications to the colour of paper ephemera is invaluable, especially for technologies that have not received a great deal of attention in the past. Consolidation and “filling in the blanks,” so to speak, allows for a consistent

lens in which to view these technologies.



A close-up on some of the Residual Media Depot's shelves.

So what are the next steps for the cataloguing process? In the coming months, we hope to complete our initial documentation of the collection, which represents about 20% of the Depot's holdings. This will be followed by a second, forensic pass in which we will disassemble some of the consoles in order to obtain more comprehensive data about technical specifications such as parts, internal connections, and manufacturing origins. We also plan to photograph each item, inside and out, and scan ephemera such as owner's manuals, warranty cards, and advertising materials.

In addition to fleshing out our initial documentation, we also hope to share the database and its controlled vocabulary with other research institutions. This is both to receive feedback, but also to "stress test" our vocabulary and spreadsheet, which have currently only seen use in the context of the

Depot's collection. This sort of collaboration also allows us to join broader academic conversations and to speculate about other uses for our controlled vocabulary. For example, there is currently no standard citation system that accounts for physical or digital games, and many of the idiosyncratic citation styles used by journals or book series seldom take hardware particularities into consideration.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Apperley, Thomas, and Jussi Parikka. "Platform studies' epistemic threshold." *Games and Culture* 13.4 (2018): 349-369.

<sup>2</sup>Beaty, Bart, and Benjamin Woo. Beaty, Bart, and Benjamin Woo. *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*. Springer, 2016. 4-5, 13-14.