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Cartoon Wasteland: Remediating and Recommodifying Archival Media in Disney's *Epic Mickey*

Colleen Montgomery¹

The University of Texas at Austin

colleen.montgomery [AT] gmail.com

Abstract:

The Walt Disney Company's multimedia empire understandably figures prominently in media industries studies of convergence, synergy, and cultural production in the age of the multinational conglomerate. While macrostructural, industry-based analyses are indispensable to understanding the industrial dimensions of Disney's cultural production, it is equally crucial to consider how the company's corporate strategies are brought to bear on the form and aesthetics of particular media texts—not only the most commonly analyzed media objects, such as movies and other filmed entertainment, but new media endeavors as well. Taking Disney's 2010 Wii video game *Disney Epic Mickey* as a case study, this paper thus examines how Disney's corporate synergy and remediation practices as well as creative participants' individual agency shaped the game's highly intertextual and digitextual design. Building on political economic analyses of Disney's corporate synergy, I discuss the ways in which *Epic Mickey*'s redeployment of archival Disney media in a new-media, digital framework is shaped by Disney's broader reissuing and recommodification strategies. Drawing from media theory work on remediation, digitextuality, and prosthetic memory, I also argue that remembering and archiving, as discursive practices, are central to the game's formal/aesthetic logic and modes of user engagement.²

Keywords: Convergence, Digitization, Economics, Film, Gaming, Disney

Oswald's Homecoming

In spite of its eponymous title, when Disney's Wii video game *Epic Mickey* was released in 2010, the game garnered much more attention for one of its secondary characters: Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the game marked the rabbit's first appearance in any Disney-animated text since 1927. As early as February 2006, when news first broke that the Walt Disney Company had acquired the rights to Oswald from NBCUniversal, much was made in the popular press of both Oswald's "homecoming" and of the ways that the rabbit might be incorporated within and across Disney's vast network of media holdings. Though in many ways a "forgotten" Disney character with whom contemporary audiences may not be familiar, Oswald has long figured in Disney lore, particularly in the many great-man histories of Walt Disney that link the "loss" of Oswald (though never a Disney-owned property) not only to the

birth of Mickey Mouse but also to Disney's emphatic insistence on maintaining absolute creative control over his intellectual property. The historical accuracy of these well-worn narratives notwithstanding, the issue of proprietary rights is nonetheless pertinent to the Oswald deal. Disney's fierce policing of its media catalogue is no myth, nor is its systematic mining of its library of trademarked and copyrighted material for new commercial content.

In the eighty years since Oswald's creation, Disney has grown from a small, independent animation studio to one of the largest media conglomerates in the world and one that, as Eric Smoodin puts it, has its "corporate finger in more cultural pies than perhaps any other twentieth century producer of mass entertainment."³ Thus, the question of how and why Disney would choose to reintroduce Oswald in a video game offers a particularly productive line of investigation for examining the corporate and aesthetic logics of Disney's synergistic remediation practices and for mapping the ways in which such commercial and creative pressures shape the production and design of specific texts. This article thus traces the history of *Epic Mickey's* development and the corporate dealings that shaped its highly intertextual formal and aesthetic design. This article's aim is to examine not only the macrostructural dimensions of Disney's corporate synergy practices and recommodification strategies but also the role that creative agents working within the larger corporate structure played in determining the game's design and deployment of "old" Disney media as well as newly secured properties, in a new-media format. Finally, parsing the game's wider cultural significance, I also consider the central function that memory and archiving, as discursive practices, perform in constructing modes of player engagement with the text.

The Walt Disney Company's multimedia empire understandably figures prominently in media industries studies of convergence, synergy, and cultural production in the age of the multinational conglomerate. While macrostructural, industry-based analyses are indispensable for understanding the industrial dimensions of Disney's cultural production, it is equally crucial to consider how the company's corporate strategies are brought to bear on the form and aesthetics of particular media texts—not only the most commonly analyzed media objects, such as movies and other filmed entertainment, but new-media endeavors as well. As Thomas Schatz argues in his contribution to *Media Industries'* inaugural issue, recent studies of media industries tend to "focus on ownership and control, on technology and policy, on marketing and consumption, with only incidental concern for the creative and cultural dynamics involved."⁴ There is comparatively little work, however, "about individual agency in the creation of media content, about the formal style and expressive qualities of individual works, and about the analysis and assessment of media texts."⁵ Schatz thus emphasizes the need for media industries studies attuned to the fact that "the media industries are cultural industries involving the systematic production and consumption of expressive, meaningful works that manifest our shared sense of ourselves, our lives, our values."⁶ Schatz's comments are worth noting here, as *Epic Mickey's* innovative combination of old and new media necessitates an attentiveness both to the corporate circumstances surrounding the game's development and to its unique formal/aesthetic qualities. Thus, in keeping with Schatz's call for a more integrated media studies approach, this essay combines a political economic analysis of the macroindustrial configurations informing *Epic Mickey's* development with a close analysis of the text's "expressive qualities" and cultural significance, and considers the role that individual creative agents played in its production.

My analysis is thus structured around four key axes of inquiry, drawing on media industries studies work on synergy, corporate archiving, and individual agency and theories of digitextuality, and prosthetic memory. First, Janet Wasko's political economic analyses of Disney undergird my arguments concerning how *Epic Mickey* figures into the broader corporate logic of Disney's synergistic recommodification and reissuing practices. While these macrostructural factors are key to unpacking the game's commercial objectives, as my second line of analysis reveals, individual creative agents also played an important role both in determining the game's design and its synergistic deployment of Disney properties. Looking at issues of creative agency, I draw primarily on an interview I conducted in June 2014 with Warren Spector, founder of the game's developer, Junction Point Studios. Spector's oral history of the game's production provides valuable insight into the commercial and aesthetic objectives that both he and Disney aimed to achieve with *Epic Mickey*. Third, engaging with Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's conceptualization of remediation—"the representation of one medium in another"—as well as Anna Everett's work on digitextuality and click theory, I offer a close textual analysis of the game's formal and aesthetic repurposing of archival and analog material in a digital medium.⁷ Lastly, turning to *Epic Mickey*'s cultural and ideological valences and identificatory structures, I borrow from Alison Landsberg's theory of "prosthetic memory" to parse the ways in which *Epic Mickey* negotiates processes of archiving and remembering.

Putting these discrete theoretical threads and interpretive approaches into dialogue with one another allows for a more comprehensive examination of the nexus of corporate and creative imperatives undergirding *Epic Mickey*'s design and gameplay as well as the identificatory mechanisms through which it engages players in cultural memory work. This paper thus proposes a methodological scaffolding for critical game-industries research attentive to the relationships between macroindustrial corporate structures, mid-level creative practices, and textual meaning-making. Before delving into this analysis, I first offer a brief overview of the game's mechanics and core narrative elements.

Cartoon Wasteland: Remediating Old Disney Media in New-Media Texts

Released for the 2010 holiday season, Disney's *Epic Mickey* is an action-adventure 3-D platforming game for the Nintendo Wii console. While *Epic Mickey* has a linear narrative progression, players largely determine their own path through the game, selecting missions to take on while exploring the gameworld in a relatively unstructured fashion. The majority of the game adopts a third-person-shooter mechanic, or "over the shoulder" perspective, in which Mickey Mouse serves as the player's avatar. As opposed to more adult-oriented military and science-fiction third-person shooters, however, here the player does not wield a gun or other weapon but rather uses a paintbrush tool to subdue enemies as well as manipulate elements in the game environment. The game unfolds in the aptly named "Cartoon Wasteland": a world filled with retired and disused classic Disney media, including, most notably, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, framed here as Mickey's forgotten and disgruntled half-brother who resents Mickey's popularity.⁸ The game's introductory cut scene informs the player that Yen Sid, of *Fantasia*'s "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (dir. James Algar, 1940), created the world as a home for "forgotten" Disney characters—those that, as one of the forgotten figures himself puts it, "the world stopped watching and stopped loving." Much as in *Fantasia*, however, Mickey interferes with the sorcerer's creation: splashing paint into the world he spawns the game's primary antagonist, the Shadow Blot (a reimagined version of Disney's the Phantom Blot, a character that first appeared in late 1930s Disney comic strips) and, trying to remedy his mistake with paint thinner, turns the world into a solvent-eaten "wasteland." Ultimately, in order to win the

game, the player must help Oswald defeat the Shadow Blot, revive Oswald's girlfriend, Ortensia, and restore Wasteland.

Epic Mickey is perhaps most intriguing for its richly intertextual worlds whose characters and environments are drawn from an immense compendium of archival Disney media ranging from theme-park rides to characters, comic books, toys, and films. The game's designers were granted full access to Disney's film and television, animation, Imagineering, and costume archives and drew a great deal of inspiration both from these corporate sources and from private collectors' holdings, purchased for use as reference material. In fact, as Spector relays, "everything in the game" had to have a "real world reference" in the Disney universe.⁹ Designers, for instance, worked from archival model sheets in animating the game's characters. To develop Cartoon Wasteland's environments, many of which are based on Disney theme-park spaces, the team used original park blueprints and visited Disneyland after hours, riding several of the theme-park attractions with the lights on to gain a better sense of their spatial dimensions.

Both through its remediation of a newly acquired property, Oswald, and in its redeployment of a wide array of proprietary Disney media, *Epic Mickey* is a particularly apposite text for examining the ways in which Disney's corporate synergy and intellectual property management strategies are brought to bear upon textual production. Given its richly intertextual design, we might also think of the game as a form of digital repository for archival Disney material that recycles and recirculates ephemera as marketable properties. In this respect, *Epic Mickey* is deeply imbricated in Disney's synergistic cross-promotion practices as well as its vaulting and reissuing cycles. As a cross-promotional vehicle, *Epic Mickey* neatly hypostasizes Mike Budd's assertion that "every Disney product is both a commodity and an ad for every other Disney commodity."¹⁰ Indeed, every individual component of the game could be read as an extended advertisement for other Disney commodities. In relation to Disney's vaulting and reissuing, the game extends the company's longstanding convention of theatrically rereleasing films—a practice that, since the mid-1980s, has exponentially expanded with reissued offerings for new home-viewing platforms. Integral to this strategy of exploiting its film library so as to maximize commercial returns over time is Disney's carefully cultivated "vaulting" policy: the practice of methodically "releasing already amortized products in home video formats as well as promoting them in other ways, thus maintaining the stable of classic Disney characters for exploitation throughout the company's various businesses."¹¹

Though *Epic Mickey* is not a "vaulted" release in the conventional sense of the term, the game does fulfill one of the primary commercial premises of the vaulting strategy as outlined in a 1997 Disney Annual Shareholders report: marketing existing properties to "a whole new generation of children and parents who have yet to collect these titles."¹² Like DVD and Blu-ray reissues of classic Disney animated films, *Epic Mickey* enables Disney to market archival media to new commercial markets in which the properties have not yet been fully exploited. The idea of collecting classic Disney media is explicitly woven into the game itself, as the player must collect "film reels" embedded in each level in order to unlock hidden content at the game's conclusion: Disney's 1933 short film *The Mad Doctor* (and if the player completes the game a second time, the 1928 Oswald short *Oh What a Knight*). The successful player therefore symbolically recuperates and reengages with old Disney media in two distinct but interconnected fashions by interacting with "forgotten" characters and collecting reels of classic Disney short films.

Epic Mickey's mobilization of existing and newly-acquired Disney intellectual properties is undoubtedly linked not only to the company's aggressive approach to brand control, copyright management, and synergy but also to the contemporary conglomerate media environment in which, as Wasko outlines, "the enforcement of intellectual property rights has become a vital issue for media and entertainment companies, especially in light of the proliferation of branded products as well as the increased global marketing of products."¹³ This impetus for brand control and intellectual property rights management—specifically, the enforcement of trademark protections—is, as Paul Grainge notes, particularly important for the "circulation and public use of cartoon characters" as animation's "inherent reproducibility lend[s] itself in equal measure to commercial proliferation and cultural policing."¹⁴ Moreover, as Grainge argues, this "dual impetus to proliferate and police . . . is all the more significant when cartoon images also function as corporate metonyms," as with Disney, which has "long sought to equate Mickey Mouse with its corporate brand identity."¹⁵ Indeed, in order to maintain control of its corporate mascot, Disney, especially through the Michael Eisner-led "Team Disney" initiatives of the 1990s, has played a significant role in extending federal copyright protection for both individuals and corporations. The company is infamous for its "tough enforcement of intellectual property rights," "rich history of litigation" against potential copyright violators, and policies designed to secure its exclusive right to generate profits from the reproduction and sale of its properties.¹⁶ Disney's pursuit of the rights to Oswald, which has enabled the company to introduce a diverse assortment of Oswald-related media into both foreign and domestic markets, offers an apt example of this type of corporate copyright exploitation in action.

In addition to *Epic Mickey*, Disney launched several simultaneous initiatives to put Oswald back into mass circulation across multiple media platforms. The very day the Oswald acquisition was announced, a costumed Oswald character appeared in the Disneyland and Disneyworld theme parks. Oswald's first large-scale remediation under the Disney insignia came with the release, in December of 2007, of a two-disc DVD set, *The Adventures of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*—the seventh installment in the Walt Disney Treasures series. In conjunction with the DVD release, Disney also introduced a series of plush toys and figurines in a select number of North American Disney Stores. Since that time, numerous types of Oswald merchandise (T-shirts, toys, rabbit-ear hats akin to the well-known Mickey Mouse ear hats, etc.) have been introduced to Disney stores and theme parks around the world, and the rabbit recently made a brief cameo appearance in Disney's first theatrical Mickey Mouse short since 1995, *Get a Horse!* (dir. Lauren MacMullen, 2013), which was theatrically released with Disney's 2013 feature film *Frozen* (dirs. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee) and also appears as a special feature on the film's DVD and Blu-ray releases. *Epic Mickey*, however, marked Oswald's first appearance in a new Disney-animated text since 1928.

In short, *Epic Mickey's* design and development is undoubtedly informed by Disney's corporate imperatives: the company's relentless policing of its properties and its sustained efforts to maximize capital gains from those assets. However, such a political economic analysis of *Epic Mickey* does not adequately account for the central role that Spector and Junction Point played in constructing the game as both a commercial and creative text. Examining the relationship between the game's artist-developers and Disney enables us to better understand both the creative agency and negotiation of commercial and creative pressures involved in the selection, adaptation, and representation of the game's Disney properties.

Junction Point: Corporate Control and Creative Agency

As Warren Spector outlines, initial talks for *Epic Mickey's* development began in 2004. Spector had recently established his Austin-based independent game-development company, Junction Point Studios, and was pitching game ideas (including an adult-oriented game loosely based on the 2000 role-playing game *Deus Ex*) to a variety of publishers. Spector first met with Disney in the fall of 2004 to pitch an idea for an adult-oriented science-fiction/fantasy game rooted in the principle of choice and consequence, a central element of his game design philosophy.

What ultimately emerged from the meeting was a project based partly on Spector's pitch and an idea that a group of interns in the Disney Interactive Summer Internship program previously had devised.¹⁷ This idea consisted of three core components, all of which ended up in the finished game: the concept of setting the game in a world for forgotten and retired characters; Mickey Mouse as the game's hero, alongside the Phantom Blot (who would later become The Shadow Blot) as the game's villain; and the return of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Spector, a self-professed lifelong Disney fan, "loved" the idea of resurrecting "characters that [he] thought deserved better than to be relegated to the dustbin of history." Disney thus engaged Spector's Junction Point Studios, in spring 2005, to do contract development work on the initial game concept. As Spector recounts, the studio completed approximately one year's worth of preliminary work on *Epic Mickey*, based on which Disney decided to green-light production; however, the corporation insisted that a production deal was contingent on its acquisition of Junction Point, a condition to which Spector initially objected. Development thus halted in early 2006 for one year until, following further contractual negotiations (which Spector says involved Disney "sweetening the deal"), Disney acquired Junction Point in July 2007 and incorporated it as a subsidiary of its in-house video game arm, Disney Interactive Studios.

Epic Mickey's subsequent development is also closely linked to another important Disney corporate deal that occurred shortly before the Junction Point takeover: Disney's acquisition of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney originally created Oswald in 1927 for a series of Universal Pictures cartoons produced by Charles Mintz, but lost control of the character in 1928, following a now infamous dispute with Mintz over the division of profit shares.¹⁸ Although it might be tempting to read *Epic Mickey* simply as a creative vessel designed to serve the broader, profit-driven corporate goal of reintroducing Oswald as a commercial property for consumption, the deal was, in fact, motivated by the *Epic Mickey* game concept itself. Based on the company's interest in Junction Point's development work on the game concept, Disney began actively seeking the rights to Oswald.

Ultimately, in February of 2006, Disney CEO Bob Iger announced that the company had entered into a contractual agreement with NBCUniversal to acquire the rights to Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. The deal largely has been framed in the popular press as a "trade," as it primarily involved the exchange of programming and promotional rights for sporting events¹⁹ as well as sportscaster Al Michaels's move from Disney's ABC/ESPN subsidiaries to NBC.²⁰ The NBCUniversal-Disney/ABC/ESPN "trade" enabled Disney not only to secure the copyright to Oswald but also to rebrand, remediate, and recommodify the character in new Disney products. However, while the Oswald trade and *Epic Mickey* are deeply imbricated in Disney's corporate reissuing practices, it is equally important to recognize that this corporate narrative does not tell the whole story: creative pressures and media laborers also played an important part in the Oswald trade and, as I detail below, the game's construction.

Undoubtedly Disney's insistence on acquiring the independent Junction Point speaks to the company's increasingly aggressive tactic, since the early 1990s, of buying up adjacent media companies (such as, to take the most prominent contemporary examples, Pixar Animation Studios, Marvel Entertainment, and Lucasfilm) to add to their already horizontally integrated corporate structure. Since beginning its foray into video game production in the early 1980s, Disney has largely relied on in-house production studios (Disney Interactive and Buena Vista Games), and third-party licensing agreements with outside developers (such as the Japanese developer, publisher, and distributor, Square Enix, which collaborated on the Disney-character-themed *Kingdom Hearts* series). In the early 2000s, however, Disney began a slew of acquisitions, purchasing Avalanche Software (2002), Black Rock Studio (2007), Junction Point (2007), and Wideload Games (2007). In spite of this impulse toward corporate convergence, however, Spector recounts that Disney was "surprisingly open and surprisingly hands off" in handling its subsidiary's development of the game. This is especially remarkable given Disney's reputation for tightly controlling its brand, especially its most globally recognizable emblem, Mickey Mouse. Part of this stemmed from Junction Point's (headquartered in Austin, Texas) geographic distance from Disney Interactive: "They tried to get me to move out to California and I refused," recalls Spector, adding, "If this was made in California at the studio, at Disney Interactive, there were going to be people from Disney Interactive all over this, and so having it generated remotely gave us a lot of freedom."

Although the Junction Point team was in regular contact with Disney Interactive and carefully monitored by Disney Corporate Brand Management, Spector asserts that Disney granted his studio a great deal of creative liberty: "during the entire development of the game the only thing they ever told us was that we couldn't show Mickey's teeth. They never said 'you must' or 'you can't' except show Mickey's teeth. Everything else was ours." When questioned about the origins of this somewhat puzzling clause Spector candidly offered, "I think they just wanted to put something in, some stake in the ground to say they had a little impact." Even after having been enfolded into Disney Interactive, Junction Point retained creative control—a point which Spector neatly illustrates: "Think about the biggest media company in the world, the most important property they own and giving us the kind of freedom they did. It's astonishing. I still look back on it and go, how did that happen?" More tellingly, Spector emphasizes that his work with Disney was contingent on the company allowing for such a "hands-off" approach. As he states, he came to the table with what he calls his "well-rehearsed" mantra: "I make the games I want to make, I make them the way I want to make them; if you don't want that, let's part company now and we'll stay friends. They signed off on that, so I got to make the Mickey Mouse game of choice and consequence."

This is not, however, to frame Spector's relationship with Disney as wholly unconstrained. Ultimately, Disney maintains the rights to the game and, although Spector has expressed interest in creating a third installment in the series, following a disappointing commercial showing for *Epic Mickey's* sequel, *Epic Mickey: The Power of Two*, Disney abandoned plans to continue the game and shut down Junction Point Studios in January 2013. But, in more practical terms, Spector's creative team was responsible for determining precisely how the game represents and remediates archival Disney media. Their creative decisions thus have important consequences for the game's ideological understanding of archival media as both commodifiable product and cultural heritage and, consequently, for the player's interaction with old Disney media. First, Spector's team undertook the redesign of Oswald, working from original Disney-animated cartoons to create a 3-D animated version of the rabbit with an

expanded backstory, personality, and range of motion. Spector also cast Frank Welker to provide vocalizations for Oswald, who, in his Disney-animated iteration, had only been a silent character. Perhaps more importantly, the game's developers also saw *Epic Mickey* as an opportunity to weave the notion of choice and consequence more completely into the game mechanics than they previously had attempted with other projects. Spector recalls that early in the game's production process, one of the lead programmers proposed, "The next step for choice and consequence is a really dynamic world where you can change the world to suit your needs. You can dynamically change the world and express your play style or your personal preferences through changing the world."

Figure 1: Painting and thinning functions

Figure 2: Painting and thinning functions

This idea of having a world that the player can choose to change to suit her personal preference became the foundational principle behind the game's mechanics. *Epic Mickey* does employ a third-person-shooter mechanic, but, unlike most games in that genre, here this formal conceit is predicated not upon shooting opponents but rather on shaping and reshaping the game environment with a paintbrush and thinner. Admittedly, as Spector notes, a gun would have been out of keeping with Mickey's contemporary persona, but the more interesting differences worth noting here are both the materials the player uses in the place of guns and ammunition and how this equipment operates. As Spector details, he wanted Mickey (the player's avatar) to "use the stuff he's made of" as his primary tool in the game. That is, the player, as Mickey,

wields a paintbrush and paint thinner device in the game, not only for combat but also to paint and erase elements of the setting as she chooses, thus integrating the choice/consequence dynamic into the game's basic mechanics (figs. 1–2). The player therefore has the option of either restoring the game's decaying characters and settings or precipitating their disintegration—a dynamic that has important implications for the game's ideological conception of the archive and remediation and as a site of both consumer and affective desire, a point to which I return in the final section of this article.

How the player decides to use the paint and thinner determines both the game's narrative trajectory and its visual and sonic makeup. Whether a player chooses predominantly to paint and restore the world or to thin and erase it impacts both the narrative outcome and the world itself in ways that the player is then shown at the game's conclusion in a series of animated cut scenes. Sonically, the player's aggregate of choices also affects the way the game is scored. As in most contemporary games, the score is adaptive to various situations (combat, romance, exploration, etc.) and environments, but the score also changes in accordance with the player's painting and thinning choices. If a player continually erases game elements, the score reflects this choice by thinning out the instrumentation of the melody, whereas a player who paints the world will hear a more robust instrumental arrangement.

While the conceptual premise of setting *Epic Mickey* in a world for “forgotten” Disney media was part of Disney's original pitch for the game, the Junction Point team extended this narrative conceit to the game's formal composition. The majority of the game unfolds in Cartoon Wasteland, represented through 3-D computer animation. However, the game also features 2-D animated components: narrative cut scenes and approximately forty transitional 2-D side-scrolling levels that the player must complete to move between Cartoon Wasteland's different areas.²¹ Of particular importance to my analysis are the latter 2-D elements, which mimic the aesthetics and mechanics of 1980s side-scrolling-platform console and arcade games such as *Super Mario Bros* and *Pac-Land*.²² The following section offers a closer analysis of these gameplay elements, reading them through the theoretical framework of digitextuality and analyzing how they articulate the corporate and industrial imperatives that initially motivated Disney's development of *Epic Mickey*.

Epic Digitextuality

From a ludological perspective, the convergence of old- and new-media texts that underlies *Epic Mickey*'s conceptual makeup also informs the game's formal/aesthetic design and game mechanics in three key ways. First, in much the same way that the game's characters and settings are plucked from the Disney archives and remediated in a new media text, *Epic Mickey*'s game mechanics also deploy the aesthetic apparatuses and materials of traditional animation in a digital game environment. In other words, using the Wii controllers, the player wields a paintbrush tool and paint or thinner to virtually “paint in 3-D” on the digital canvas of the game interface. Second, the game negotiates “old” and “new” gameplay styles (side-scrolling-platform and third-person-shooter modes of play, respectively) and aesthetic codes (3-D rendered environments and 2-D “filmic” levels), combining 3-D animated platform levels that deploy the haptic, biofeedback play elements of the Wii console, with 2-D side-scrolling levels that require the player to move in a fixed lateral trajectory. Crucially, these side-scrolling levels are also aesthetically differentiated from Cartoon Wasteland's volumetric worlds and are self-consciously coded as “filmic” spaces. Each of these levels is directly inspired by 1920s–1950s

Disney animations, such as [Steamboat Willie](#) (dirs. Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney, 1928) and [Alpine Climbers](#) (dir. David Hand, 1933) among many others.

Visually, their flickering, grainy look and sprocket-holed filmstrip borders conjure the materiality of celluloid (fig. 3). Sonically, these levels feature a sound loop that evokes the noises of a film projector, and many of them also reference classic Disney films' scores.²³ Moreover, to gain entrance into these levels, the player must jump in and out of projector screen "portals" that quite explicitly mark the transition between the game's 2-D filmic and 3-D volumetric surfaces (fig. 4). Put differently, situating *Epic Mickey*'s remediated properties along Bolter and Grusin's spectrum of remediation ("based on the degree of perceived competition or rivalry between the new media and the old"), the game falls into the category of "electronic remediations [that] seem[s] to want to emphasize the difference [between the old and the new] rather than erase it, thus engendering a form of "hypermediacy."²⁴ Indeed, *Epic Mickey* is a hypermediated text on numerous levels: the game remediates old Disney characters, theme parks, and other properties and deploys the formal and aesthetic codes of celluloid film, hand-drawn concept art, and 2-D side-scrolling platform games.

Figure 3: 2-D side-scrolling "filmic" levels

Figure 4: Projector screen portals

Third, from a production standpoint, the Junction Point team's creative process can also be understood as a remediation practice. Spector details that, in order to maintain a sense of historical and aesthetic continuity in the digital animation of the game's archival properties, the

animators worked from “clips from the real cartoons and played and composited our characters into those sequences . . . so that they overlaid each other, so that you could see both at the same time.” In other words, the animators digitally composited their 3-D character models directly onto their analog antecedents and worked from this palimpsestic text to simulate the “squash and stretch” aesthetic of Disney’s traditional hand-drawn animation style, using computer-generated animation technology.

Given the game’s negotiation of old and new media, of polyvalent play modalities and aesthetic codes, it is instructive to read *Epic Mickey*’s aesthetic and economic “reanimation” of archival media within the framework of digitextuality. Everett describes digitextuality as a process by which “new media technologies make meaning not only by building a new text through absorption and transformation of other texts, but by embedding the entirety of texts (analog and digital) seamlessly within the new.”²⁵ In much the same way, *Epic Mickey* makes meaning through its negotiation of Wasteland’s digital environments and interstitial “filmic” spaces. In effect, it works through a new media environment to introduce the player-consumer to a wide range of “old” remediated Disney artifacts woven into the game’s digital universe. Critically, however, this remediation of analog content is more than a simple redeployment of other forms of Disney media.

Following Everett’s argument that “the usefulness of articulating new-media practices’ imbrication in old-media precedents is not to proffer a reduction of the former to a mere rearticulation of the latter,” mapping *Epic Mickey*’s digitextuality involves interrogating how “cybernetic tools” “recycle, recode, and redeploy classical-media modes and codes to heighten contemporary media users’ and consumers’ affective responses to new-media functions.”²⁶ For Everett, digitextuality lays bare the “interstices between our nostalgic analog dreams and discomfiting digital realities . . . in our congealing technocracy.”²⁷ In other words, digitextual practices must be situated within our increasingly digitized and hypermediated context. Analog media is therefore framed as a means by which to counteract the rapidity with which media technologies are now advancing, mitigating the effects of digitization and technological change by allowing for a retreat into a “nostalgic analog dream.”²⁸

In relation to *Epic Mickey*, I would add a reciprocal trajectory to Everett’s model. Inasmuch as the game’s use of 2-D animation might render its digital aesthetics more affectively resonant for media users more familiar with “classical-media modes and codes,” I would also argue that this dynamic exchange operates in the inverse direction in equal measure. That is, remediating archival media and characters—and specifically squash-and-stretch cartoon aesthetics that are very much at odds with computer animation’s 3-D volumetrics—within a new-media text potentially heightens the affective appeal of this “old” media for users and consumers whose media interactions might well be largely circumscribed to new-media environments (cell phones’ digital displays, computer screens, tablet devices, and so on). *Epic Mickey*’s digitextuality is thus not merely a reflection of Disney’s relentless reissuing cycles but an aesthetic strategy that serves numerous economic and ideological functions. The dialogical relationship between old and new media operates on a number of levels: the game recuperates out-of-circulation media and remediates its unfamiliar aesthetic codes by incorporating them into a digital game design and, simultaneously, engages in a form of intertextual storytelling and marketing.

Finally, in addition to repurposing traditional animation’s fundamental tools and techniques (in an era in which digital animation vastly overshadows hand-drawn animation’s box-office

appeal), *Epic Mickey's* haptic paint/thinner functions can also be understood in relation to Everett's notion of "click theory," one of the underlying components of digitextuality. Everett proposes:

digital media technologies are distinguished from their analog counterparts through a sort of phenomenological "click fetish" and concomitant lure of sensory plenitude effect, presumably available simply, instantaneously, and pleasurably with any one of several clicking apparatuses . . . such as the computer mouse, video game joystick, wireless cell phone with Internet connectivity . . .²⁹

Read through the lens of click theory, *Epic Mickey's* digitextual codes might then be understood as a strategy for intensifying player's phenomenological connection with the game's digital interface. By allowing the player to paint and thin with the Wii joystick—to create and erase the digital environment with her own body—the game bridges the player's physical-corporeal space and the game's virtual space and thereby, through what Everett terms a new form of "kinesics," calls forth "new modalities of corporeal interactive plenitude."³⁰

***Epic Mickey* and Prosthetic Memory**

It is also productive to consider how the game as a digitextual site of "interactive plenitude" and nostalgic return to an "analog dream" fits within the broader popular construction of the Wii platform itself. As Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor note, when the Wii gaming system was first introduced in 2006, many game enthusiasts opted for the console over its competitor PlayStation 3 "not for its graphics or even its motion-based input, but rather for the ease with which it allows players to re-experience classic games like *Super Mario Brothers* (1985) and *Donkey Kong* (1985) through its Virtual Console" which offered "downloadable emulations" of classic Nintendo games.³¹ Thus, the idea of offering the player a nostalgic return to an obsolete past is built directly into the console's design. On a broader level, Whalen and Taylor argue that there is an inherent process of remembering and nostalgia built into the video game medium as it necessitates both a repetitive form of gameplay that "relies on players' memory and a technology that is itself built using computer memory."³² Furthermore, if, as they argue, video games "offer experiences of remembering that may be personal or cultural," how a game such as *Epic Mickey* activates these mnemonic processes through the player's engagement with the text is central to understanding the game's discursive relationship to memory, history, and nostalgia.³³

Epic Mickey's nostalgic repurposing of Disney history is explicitly built into the game's central narrative conceit: the game frames Oswald as Mickey Mouse's older half-brother, and Mickey's trajectory through Wasteland is structured as a sort of family reunion. Indeed, from the outset of the acquisition, Disney framed Oswald's return to the studio as a nostalgic homecoming and return to the Disney "family." In a 2006 Disney press release announcing the Oswald acquisition, Bob Iger described the deal as bringing Oswald back to "the home of his creator" and references Walt Disney's daughter, Diane Disney Miller's approbation for the deal, thus adding a further extratextual layer to the discourses of family and homecoming.³⁴

Furthermore, mirroring what we might call the game's commercial objective of putting archival properties back into commercial circulation, the player-as-Mickey's goal in the game is, quite explicitly, to remember and recuperate archival Disney media that the average player is likely to have forgotten or perhaps never heard of at all (figs. 5–6). The game's lead designer, Chase

Jones, neatly illustrates this point in one of the game's special features segments: "The story around *Epic Mickey* is about remembering these forgotten characters. Not only is Mickey doing that, but the player is doing that as well . . . as you, the player, go through you're learning about characters you may have never seen before from the Disney Archives and now you're remembering them as well as allowing Mickey to remember them." This idea of "remembering" that which one never knew speaks to the ways in which the game not only plays on Disney fans' knowledge of and nostalgia for obsolete Disney media (such as retired characters and defunct theme-park attractions), but also invokes a type of what Alison Landsberg terms "prosthetic memory" work. For Landsberg, prosthetic memories are facilitated by the technologies of mass culture and thus are "memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense. These are implanted memories [that] unsettle the boundaries between real and simulated."³⁵ Landsberg asserts that prosthetic memories are reflective of "the power of the mass media to create experiences and to implant memories, the experience of which we have never lived,"³⁶ and she emphasizes the utopian potential of such mass cultural texts to facilitate collective memory projects. Indeed, she argues that "capitalist commodification and mass culture have created the potential for a progressive, even a radical, politics of memory."³⁷

Figures 5 and 6: Mickey tries to remember Horace Horsecollar

In *Epic Mickey*'s case, however, it is difficult to separate the game's evocations of the past from its commodification, its *privatization* of memory in the service of the corporate objectives of remediation. The game engages the player in memory work that cultivates affective ties to

Disney archival media via the player-as-Mickey's prosthetic memories of forgotten characters, linking the process of consumption to emotional engagement. The game does not simply tell the player about these forgotten characters: it kinesthetically and emotionally involves her in remembering them from Mickey's subject position as a friend and family member. As an interactive, participatory medium, the video game also offers the potential for creating more deeply affective connections and emotional identification with *Epic Mickey's* archival media than a DVD collection or other media text that operates through, to use Linda Hutcheon's terms, "showing" or "telling" modes of narrative engagement.³⁸ The game thus arguably performs a pedagogical function, engaging the player in interactively learning about the game's cultural objects through an affective process of remembering with, and as, Mickey.

Simultaneously, however the game's operative principle of choice and consequence troubles such a mnemonic trajectory. Spector emphasizes that the game does not "tell you [the player] that family and friends are important, but ask[s] you the question and then let[s] you interact with them [the characters]." While, in order to win the game, the player must defeat the Shadow Blot and facilitate Mickey and Oswald's reconciliation, throughout the game she can choose to complete or ignore numerous other missions that involve responding to characters' requests for help. Similarly, because she can choose to paint and restore Wasteland or use thinner to hasten its disintegration, the player's interactions with Disney history, and the degree to which she participates in remembering and restoring it, are not strictly circumscribed. Thus, while the game constructs affective relationships to Disney media by suturing the player to Mickey's subject position, it also interpellates the player as archivist, granting her the choice of determining which elements of the game to remember and restore and which to "forget" or discard to "the dustbin of history."³⁹

Yet the seemingly ambivalent or transgressive politics of this archival and memory work are arguably recuperated at the game's conclusion, when the player is directly confronted with the material consequences of her aggregate of choices. Following the restoration of order to the narrative world, players are presented a series of cut scenes that reflect the results of their decisions throughout the game. These scenes, tailored to the player's playstyle, show how choices to accept or ignore missions to help secondary characters have positively or negatively impacted these characters' lives. Although Spector emphasizes that there is no "good" or "bad" way to play the game, these scenes cement the game's linkage of consumption, archiving, and memory by building in emotionally cathartic reinforcements for restorative players and suggesting how those that have chosen to discard missions – and, by extension, Disney archival properties – have punished others. As a result, on an ideological level, *Epic Mickey* facilitates the generation of polyvalent prosthetic memories, while implicitly rewarding players invested in rehabilitating Wasteland's commercially and aesthetically remediated properties. Thus, if according to Landsberg, prosthetic memory's cultural work involves "chang[ing] a person's consciousness" in a way that might "enable ethical thinking and the formation of previously unimagined political alliances," *Epic Mickey* channels this prosthetic memory work toward generating previously unexploited affective and consumer relationships with old Disney media in a new commercial context.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Although there are no plans to continue the *Epic Mickey* series, Disney Interactive's more recent endeavor *Disney Infinity* (2013) espouses a similar strategy of utilizing the video game medium to remediate preexisting branded material, drawn from historically and generically discrete

Disney properties, within a cohesive universe. The game, which employs collectible figurines of Disney characters—from Sully of *Monsters Inc.* (dir. Pete Docter, 2002), to Jack Sparrow of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (dir. Gore Verbinski, 2003)—as game controllers also integrates processes of collecting within gameplay. However, unlike *Epic Mickey*, *Disney Infinity* and its sequel *Disney Infinity: Marvel Superheroes* rely largely on proven commercial properties to bolster both game and figurine sales. Not only has this approach proven highly lucrative—the first installment of the series alone has brought in more than \$500 million in retail sales—it has also allowed Disney Interactive to create video game tie-ins for properties deemed unable to support a dedicated game or difficult to adapt to the medium. As a case study of industrial approaches to remediation, *Epic Mickey* thus points to the importance of examining both Disney's successful commercial titles and its failed experiments, which can provide valuable insight into the company's shifting industrial approaches to repurposing preexisting properties in the video game medium.

From a political economic perspective, *Epic Mickey's* remediation and recommodification of archival Disney media offer an apt synecdoche of the company's aggressive management of its intellectual property rights. Yet while *Epic Mickey* no doubt participates in Disney's corporate reissuing and recommodification practices, creative workers also played a central role in determining how the game represents and remediates old Disney media and in structuring the player's interactions with old-media texts in a new-media environment. Thus, although *Epic Mickey* could be read simply as a corporate endeavor to mine the Disney archives for commercial content, an examination of the game's development history indicates the need for a more integrated critical-game studies and media-industries studies approach attentive to both the macro- and microindustrial determinants that shape textual properties. Similarly, *Epic Mickey's* negotiation of analog and archival artifacts in a digitextual video game suggests new ways for media industries scholars, archivists, and practitioners to explore how video games might be employed to offer new interactive modes of digital archiving. As a game predicated on processes of collecting, restoring, and remembering on both a material and a symbolic level, *Epic Mickey* calls for the development of new analytical frameworks for understanding how games can imbricate consumption, haptic memory work, and affective engagement within the game text.

¹ [Colleen Montgomery](#) is a PhD candidate in media studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation project, supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship, examines the industrial dimensions of vocal performance in Disney and Pixar animated features of the late 1980s through the first decade of the 2000s. Her work has been published in *Cinephile*, *Animation Studies*, and the *Cinema Journal Teaching Dossier*. She currently serves as the co-coordinating editorial chair of *The Velvet Light Trap Journal*.

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³ Smoodin, Eric, "Introduction: How to Read Walt Disney," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁴ Thomas Schatz, ["Film Studies, Cultural Studies, and Media Industries Studies,"](#) *Media Industries* 1, no. 1 (2014): 40.

- ⁵ Ibid., 39.
- ⁶ Ibid., 40.
- ⁷ J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 45.
- ⁸ Other notable “forgotten” characters include the Gremlins, title characters of a 1943 Roald Dahl book and uncompleted feature film collaboration between Dahl and Disney; Horace Horsecollar and Clarabelle Cow, who first appeared in late 1920s Disney animated shorts; and Mickey Mouse’s eponymous nemesis in the 1933 short *The Mad Doctor*.
- ⁹ Warren Spector, in discussion with the author, June 19, 2014. All other Spector quotes cited in the article are also drawn from this interview.
- ¹⁰ Mike Budd, “Introduction: Private Disney, Public Disney,” in *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*, ed. Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 1.
- ¹¹ Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 44.
- ¹² Ibid., 45.
- ¹³ Ibid., 83.
- ¹⁴ Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 115.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Wasko, *Understanding Disney*, 84.
- ¹⁷ The interns were a group of students participating in Disney Interactive’s Student Internship program: a paid summer internship for graduate and undergraduate students.
- ¹⁸ Subsequently, in 1928, Universal head Carl Laemmle ousted Mintz and installed Walter Lantz as the series’ new producer. Lantz would go on to produce more than 140 Oswald shorts for Universal between 1928 and 1943. Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 51–58.
- ¹⁹ The deal also involved the transfer of a number programming and promotional rights, including telecast rights to the live Friday coverage of four Ryder Cup golf championships through 2014, expanded video highlights for the Olympics through 2012, video promotion for ESPN’s *Monday Night Football* during NBC’s *Sunday Night Football* through 2011, and expanded highlight rights for other NBC Sports properties through 2011.
- ²⁰ Walt Disney Company, “[Walt Disney’s 1927 Animated Star—Oswald the Lucky Rabbit—Returns to Disney: Mickey Mouse’s Predecessor Rejoins Disney’s Family of Animated Characters through Agreement with NBC/Universal](#),” last modified February 9, 2006.
- ²¹ The cut scenes are notable not only for their 2-D cinematic aesthetic but also for their animation style, which was directly inspired by Disney concept artist Mary Blair’s work.
- ²² In side-scrolling platform games, the player’s avatar moves laterally across the screen, jumping between platforms or over obstacles to advance in the game. Rather than

view the action from the character's point of view, the player's perspective is perpendicular to the axis of action.

²³ Spector notes that his production team was given full access to the *Pinocchio* score, in particular. Jim Dooley composed original music for the game.

²⁴ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 46.

²⁵ Anna Everett, "Digitextuality and Click Theory: Theses on Convergence Media in the Digital Age," in *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, ed. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ Anna Everett, "Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 93, doi:10.1353/cj.2004.0015.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Everett, "Digitextuality and Click Theory," 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, eds., *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ "Walt Disney's 1927 Animated Star – Oswald the Lucky Rabbit – Returns to Disney."

³⁵ Alison Landsberg, "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner," in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage, 1995), 175.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁷ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 143.

³⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 23.

³⁹ It is worth noting here that Spector himself was formerly employed as an archivist at The University of Texas's Harry Ransom Center, where he was involved in creating the first catalogue for the David O. Selznick Collection.

⁴⁰ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 143.

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