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WHEN THINGS DON'T GO WELL: EMULATION, CHARACTERISTICS AND AESTHETICS (in German)

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If we think about the digital documents at the DLA Marbach, the first thing that comes to mind are the static, text-oriented documents. Their long-term useability is ensured by regularly updating the occasional obsolete file formats, in other words, changing the digital objects themselves to make them compatible with the latest presentation environments. We implicitly adopt a strategy which does not focus on the digital materiality of these objects, but rather aims to separate the information objects from their material carriers. Useability in this case means being able to intellectually receive or mechanically analyse texts and their earlier drafts and components. Media files, e.g. audio and video files, seem to be less static in comparison, yet these too remain linear and their integrity can be preserved in the long-term by media and format migration without negatively impacting their aesthetic essence.

Computer games, however, are non-linear, interactive objects whose potentially countless branches in their decision trees make it all but impossible to migrate them linearly into other formats and media. Using computer games means playing them, i.e. executing them according to their minimal (or better yet, recommended) system requirements. Screencasts, accompanying material or even the source text are welcome supplements, but no substitutes.

»When a game is no longer executable, we must consider it entirely lost, because not even the results of its existence, aside from game scores and screenshots perhaps, remain understandable.«[1] In this respect, we realise that computer games as digital objects must be preserved in unaltered condition. What needs to change is the environment in which the game is played and offered if the target platforms at the time of publication are no longer available. Emulation and virtualisation must be applied instead.

[1] Suchodoletz, Dirk von: Funktionale Langzeitarchivierung digitaler Objekte. Erfolgsbedingungen des Einsatzes von Emulationsstrategien. 2008, S. 49. [Link: http://files.dnb.de/nestor/edition/01-suchodoletz.pdf]

In this presentation, we pose the question: What does it mean to run a computer game in useable form and to preserve its aesthetics authentically? We outline a classification of computer games based on typical system requirements and propose idealised decades of this still young genre dating back to around 1975 as a ›Game History of Technologies‹.[2] We then juxtapose these with plausible deployment technologies and scenarios, and thereby create a matrix of presumably acceptable and non-acceptable combinations. ›Non-acceptable‹ in this case can be defined by execution which is so poor that the game is unusable, or alternatively, it can mean that the personnel and technical effort required in the long term is unacceptably high.

What do we lose if we exclude the non-acceptable combinations? Do these systematic ›blind spots‹ put at risk the task of collecting a representative selection of literary computer games and making them available in authentic form to a future research community? Hope remains that especially the literary and narratively innovative computer games will prove sufficiently robust, and that we will be able to analyse their aesthetic structures even when emulation doesn't go so well.

[2] Zimmermann, Olaf; Falk, Felix (Hg.): Handbuch Gameskultur. Über die Kulturwelten von Games. 2020, S. 40.

[Link: https://www.kulturrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HandbuchGameskultur.pdf]