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WHEN IN *STELLIS*: AN AUTO-ARCHAEOLOGY OF A DIGITAL ARTIFACT COLLECTION FROM *TEARS OF THEMIS*

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Abstract
Primarily, this research aimed to appraise and discover how a 21st-century Filipino object owner collocates meaning with digital artifacts and identify what cultural underpinnings influence the affinity with these things. Two novel ideas in contemporary archaeology were utilized in this study: (1) auto-archaeology, a method of employing archaeological analysis on one's objects, and; (2) archaeogaming, which treats digitally constructed objects as artifacts (Reindhard, 2018). Using these postmodern perspectives, I conducted an auto-archaeology of my collection of digital artifacts from the game *Tears of Themis* (COGNOSPHERE, 2020) and aimed to unearth a retelling of my recent past as a posthuman Filipino. Informed largely by Ellersdorfer's (2021) autoethnographic archaeology and Woods' (2022) gacha game discourse, my case study involved extracting memories from select pieces from my collection of digital artifacts. Findings reveal that not only can these objects reconstruct their distinct semiotic context through the game design, story of acquisition, and in-game usage but also deconstruct off-game contexts that are personally attached by an individual owner to its immateriality through perception and affective embedding. In so doing, the digital artifacts amplify the different voices inscribed within each artifact in its decontextualized form as a unit in a rhizomatic network of digital objects.

Keywords: affective embedding, archaeogaming, auto-archaeology, memory, *Tears of Themis*

Introduction
Recently, a tidal wave of (virtual) artifacts splashed onto our calm shores as contemporary life has become so entangled with the digital (Aycock, 2021). Thus, a postmodern view of materials emerges from the waters: one that includes objects characterized not merely by their physicality or thingness but also by their (im)materiality in cyberspace. For instance, Reinhard (2018) explained how video game objects are considered immaterial artifacts belonging to culture and people tied to their game lore and players. If, indeed, things and their properties are "not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational" (Ingold, 2007, p. 1) in character, there is something more to digital artifacts than just their (im)materiality.

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Likewise, contemporary methods of analyzing objects and artifacts are gaining much traction. From remote analysis and network analysis to archaeology of the virtual world, new archaeological methods are continuously re-explored and re-imagined from a plethora of viewpoints. One of the fairly new lenses is auto-archaeology, which attempts to understand the history and experience of an individual by allowing the object-owner himself/herself/themselves to become the intermediary for the object's material narrative. Unlike traditional archaeology which identifies culturally significant artifacts to reconstruct the past, auto-archaeology amplifies the marginalized context, history, and value found in personally owned objects that may otherwise be treated as too idiosyncratic, too insignificant, or too inchoate for archaeological analysis in an academic context.

At its core, auto-archaeology excavates personal narratives that are tied to larger social histories. For instance, Ellersdorfer (2021) wrote an autoethnographic essay on her collection of postcards to underscore a self-reflexive analysis of objects framed from a Marxist historical point of view/ In effect, she was able to explain what memories her postcard collection may hold, and why they were collected, and why they were kept. By carefully analyzing objects, one can find stories embedded into its material, where the traces of its use "have the potential to become witnesses of past times and anchors of memory, which can serve as a basis for the creation of meanings and histories" (Stockhammer, 2020, p.42).

As they stand, memories are reflective of personal and social histories. However, they categorically remain ephemeral at the onset of degradation, distortion, and disinformation. To solidify personal and social histories, memories within artifacts remain a source of meanings and histories of a group of people about their collective identities (Stockhammer, 2020). By re-animating the memories from objects through the owner's self-reflexive practice, auto-archaeology allows the researcher to emphasize the capabilities of distinct individual stories to contribute to collective identity, shared history, and public discourse through the juxtaposition of the biographies of both the object and its owner. In this way, auto-archaeology elicits the multivocality of objects, especially in the contemporary period. Nevertheless, auto-archaeology has not been applied to the study of digital objects despite the increasing importance of digitalization in the lives of contemporary individuals.

In this study, I attempt to unpack an archaeology of the recent and contemporary past by examining select pieces from my digital artifact collection from *Tears of Themis* thereby exploring the linkages between (digital) artifacts and memory through my posthuman experiences in the gamespace of *Stellis*. My collection, like other *Tears of Themis* collections, is a magnum opus waiting to be archaeologically reviewed.

Informed largely by Ellersdorfer's (2021) autoethnographic archaeology and Woods' (2022) discourse on gacha games, I attempt to discover how a 21st-century Filipino object owner like me ascribes meaning to a digital artifact and what underlying cultural underpinnings influence my affinity with these things. In so doing, I attempt to understand how digital artifacts may be archaeologically understood and recorded. As a postmodern ethnoarchaeological approach to the objects of the contemporary past, auto-archaeology allowed me to situate my virtual memories within the Philippine historical conjuncture of early 2022 to identify what a fragmentary perspective of the posthuman Filipino experience looks like then. At

the core of my study is an autoethnographic relay of the memories encapsulated within the digital artifacts I present, painting a juxtaposition of the material and immaterial aspects of myself and my lived experience about the historical conditions at that time. Similar to Hansen (2020), this study contributes to the literature on archaeogaming and auto-archaeology by proposing an understanding of the application and use of this ethnoarchaeological method in virtual items, a feat that has not yet been tackled by prior research. Ultimately, I intend to demonstrate how we can rethink virtual things, figuratively, and archaeologically.

Method

In media archaeology, the cartridge of the game itself is the artifact, where the game is considered a physical material relating to its box, the manuals, the disks, and even the plastic instructions (Moshenska, 2014); however, Reinhard (2018) critically explained in *Archaeogaming* that the code itself procures immaterial objects that are, in and of themselves, (digital) artifacts. Paying close attention to virtual worlds and blended realities, archaeologists concluded that aside from the physical artifacts of computers and phones, there subsists "born-digital artifacts that reside within spaces we cannot see without the aid of hardware, artifacts within artifacts" (Reinhard, 2018, p.7). These digital artifacts include in-game objects which are either deliberately made by code or the player representations in video games such as avatars or character-sprites (Reinhard, 2018).

A liberalized theorization of auto-archaeology allows its contingent application to these digital artifacts. Also called autoethnographic archaeology, auto-archaeology is defined as a method of ethnoarchaeology that "[explores an] individuals' artifacts as supporting evidence to interpret experiences... using autoethnographic methodologies" (Harrison & Schofield, 2009; Kattari & Beltran, 2019, p. 8). In addition, auto-archaeology is a transdisciplinary approach to archaeology that includes other social sciences relevant to interpreting materially embedded experiences, and its applicability to digital artifacts cannot be overlooked. If current methods of social science propose to dismantle the traditional (and often technically restrictive) modes of archaeological analysis, then a deterritorialization of archaeology from the fieldwork excavation and site digging must occur. To excavate artifacts must not only mean digging from a site and retrieving materials from underneath the soil brushed to perfection but also include rummaging through the virtual world to unearth traces of digital things that played a part in players-participants' in-game cultural mobilization.

Researchers commissioned auto-archaeology as an effort to understand the recent and contemporary past through self-reflexivity. By studying collected postcards, gazing upon psychological reports, and transcribing one's self (as an object of war), auto-archaeological scholars collocate personal experience with objects by describing the ideological viewpoints found in each material (see Ellersdorfer, 2021; Hanan, 2019; Schrader, 2014). On this premise, to formulate an auto-archaeology of digital artifacts means that the researcher has to elucidate his or her posthuman identity. After all, the human mind augmented computer-mediated identities (Wilde, 2020) which allows them to access the digital objects within a virtual world. Through the extension of technology, the 21st-century human is bewitched with a posthuman self, characterized by an array of digital identities that transcend the human body into several channels such as new media,

healthcare mechanisms for living support, and gadgets, among others (Haraway, 2000).

Triangulating the intersections of video game digital artifacts, auto-archaeology, and posthuman identities, I conducted this case study about my digital artifact collection in the gacha game *Tears of Themis* (accessible and retrievable by my digital identity Kei UID:200534885) to contribute to the pressing demand for archaeological analysis of digital artifacts (Aycock, 2021). Because these objects are now in my possession, the biography of these artifacts has been culturally linked to my experience as a Filipino in a wider social and historical context. In particular, I launched this case study with three research questions in mind:

> (1) How are memories associated with virtual objects from video games?
> (2) How can virtual artifacts from video games reconstruct the recent and contemporary past through semiotic representation?
> (3) How might virtual artifacts from video games be recognized archaeologically in the Southeast Asian context?

Anent the first question, on Ellersdrofer's (2021) note that material objects find their anchors of memory in the physicalities of the objects (i.e. creases, folds, its wear-and-tear), this case study seeks to identify the anchors of digital memory of virtual artifacts considering that they are immaterial in composition. Secondly, the semiotics of objects allows for a reconstruction of history through meaning-making thus marking the semiotics of virtual objects as one mode of reconstructing the recent and contemporary digitally-linked past. Lastly, drawing from the archaeological framework of record heirlooms by Lillios (1999), the third question arose out of the increasing need for virtual archaeology research to understand how virtual objects can be interpreted and reported archaeologically, especially in the Southeast Asian context where few archaeogaming artifacts have been put on archaeological record (see Russo & Watkins, 2005; Wallace, 2022).

An auto-archaeological approach to these queries allows the case study to account for the "shifting recategorization of artifacts... over their lifetime" (Lillios, 1999, p. 20) based on my distinguished point of reference. In the same way that postcards can reveal anthropological points of nostalgia (Ellersdorfer, 2021), a slew of academic records of disciplinary action reveal institutionalized homophobia (Fox, 2014; Fox, 2010), and that the self, as a participant in the war, poses as memorabilia of trauma (Schrader, 2014), I expect my collection of digital artifacts from Stellis to emphasize the distinctive posthuman Filipino narratives inscribed within them to illustrate the history in which my virtual objects are situated and how they may be archaeologically understood.

Findings and Discussion

Contextualizing tears of themis

Published by COGNOSPHERE, *Tears of Themis* is a detective-romance otome game (乙女ゲーム, otome gēmu, literally meaning 'maiden game') that features the story of Rosa–the main character whose name can be changed by the user—who is a well-instated lawyer from a reputable legal firm in *Stellis*. Through a series of battles of wit called debates, she navigates the city of Stellis with her argument-wrecking rhetoric powered by cards carrying images of the four male

love interests–Vyn, Luke, Artem, or Marius–following a rock-paper-scissors mechanic. As an interactive fiction, the gameplay of *Tears of Themis* involves preliminary investigation, case studies, and appearance in court through text-based click adventure. However, it is also largely considered a gacha game because of its in-game roulette model whereby the cards used in debates are acquired through loot boxes called 'Visions'. According to Woods (2022), gacha games "[incentivize] players to spend real money in return for the chance to open a loot box and receive a randomly selected virtual item" (p.2). These types of games generate revenue through these loot boxes because, although the currency needed to get the boxes is easily obtainable through rigorous grinding through time-limited events and progressing through the story, real-time payment options allow the consumer-player to bypass all the towering tedious tasks and buy off in-game currency to purchase loot boxes with real money. Underneath this peculiar business model of gacha games is a complex layer of cultural and socio-economic factors that determine gameplay and spending habits. Woods (2022) found that central to these purchasing factors is the relational characteristic of the characters in the gacha games that "rationalize different gameplay decisions" (p.2). In effect, motivation to spend and play in gacha games is underpinned by affective embedding, the relational investment that stems directly from a consumer and their perceived connection with any living or non-living thing. On a specific note, affective embedding in gacha games is controlled largely by psycho-social cues, player-perceived value, lifestyle, and capitalist logic (Woods, 2022).

Within the broader context of affective embedding, gacha games "manipulate player's desire for escapist fantasy" and "expand reality along new planes of experience and becoming" (Woods, 2022, p.5) through the marketing of these loot boxes in-game. The primary display of this technique stems from celebrating time-limited events that reward player participants with in-game currency, free loot box vouchers, expendable energy, and character power upgrades, to name a few. Aside from that, gacha games also provide daily log-in bonuses to encourage players to log in every day to get free rewards by simply just opening the app, all the while showcasing (through eye-popping ads) the new banners and features to discover how a 21st-century Filipino object-owner like me ascribes meaning to a digital artifact and what underlying cultural underpinnings influence my affinity with these things.

Within the gacha-designed world of *Stellis*, I distributed a part of my identity onto Rosa (whom I named Kei) as an extension of my technologized self. The initial complications in my dissection of this identity are found in the happenstance that Rosa is female and I am a male. Nonetheless, I position myself differently in *Stellis* as a man aiming to form homosocial relationships with the male leads and as an individual struggling to perform according to hegemonic masculinity and express affection (Soresca, 2013) in direct contrast to heteroromantic (or homoromantic) relationships that it sells to female and LGBTQIA+ players. Essentially, I am differentiating my position as a male player of *Tears of Themis* as opposed to female players; in this way, I can piece together *Stellis* memories that are truly personalized and unique from my perspective. After all, what has initially drawn me to this game is Artem's and Luke's delicate looks which defy hegemonic masculinity, situating my affinity with them through our shared 'soft masculinity' (Hong, 2021) as I find

my strengths not in my machismo or power but in my intellect and storytelling skills.

In the succeeding recollective vignettes, I also situate myself as a posthuman Filipino player who possesses an entangled digital and real 'I.' Apart from my physical self, I am also extending my identity by distributing a mediated self onto the gamespace of Stellis as another identity characterized by posthuman subjectivity (Wilde, 2020). Through this, I am actively dismembering my identity into two parts: a digital one and a real one which, by and large, are treated as the single 'I' that performs a digitized identity in *Stellis* mechanically controlled by my own hands and perceived through my own eyes. Forthwith, I narrate a story of these fragmented identities and how they coalesce into one.

Stories from Stellis: An assortment of sorts

(Un)sweet(ened)

Birthday parties are always a wonderful treat, but the preparations for them have never been my cup of tea. Often, organizing get-togethers requires a lot of time and energy which, as of the moment, I cannot bear to manage. Despite my seemingly peculiar lack of interest in these activities, I unwittingly participated in the preparation for Artem's Birthday because of two things: (1) Artem is one of my two most beloved friends in Stellis (Luke is the other one!) and (2) I had to distract myself from the heavy lift that is law school.

Three souvenirs from this event commemorate my (virtual) participation in setting up Artem's birthday surprise: a common R card, an invitation, and a badge. Like a buttercream shortcake topped with powdered coffee grinds, these things taste sweet with a hint of bitterness.

The Deduction common R card has, on its face, Artem clad in business casual attire which he wore during the date with the main character (through which I have projected myself).

Bearing 5 stars to its name, this card has been caved in from five (5) duplicates of the same card obtained through the course of April 16, 2022, up until April 26, 2022. While it is not used directly for debates, this card with a power of 1856 at Lvl. 40 finds its spot in my support decks of my Strong Deck, Favorites Deck, and Revolving Deck for ample assistance. After all, its passive skills "Layer by Layer α 1" boosts a card's influence/power, and "Progressive 1" boosts defense when it is placed in the Support Deck.

The second object is called the "Mesmerizing" invitation featuring the street-side tableau of Artem's birthday celebration prepared by me. The invitation captures the picture-perfect moment of showing my surprise to Artem. It is displayed on the upper portion of my public profile and serves as a wallpaper from my user interface when I log in to the game. If I click on the wallpaper, it replays Artem's words of gratitude for my efforts.

The third object is a small badge entitled "Cherished Time Badge" which is aptly placed in the "Badge Display" section of my profile. Its description reads 'Time passes, but you're still the only wish I have. Exclusive Days to Re-Live [sic] Forever badge."

As the badge reveals, these objects are apt remembrances of the cherished memories of the days I want to re-live forever. These days in Stellis merged one in me: my investigative journalist spirit and my legalistic technique of debating to

interview audiences about the Film Festival and the identity of the film critic Mockingbird. With each successful report, I obtain 'heartfelt gifts' which are used to purchase decorations for Artem's birthday celebration (I collected enough to fill a whole street).

To control my fictional stress in-game indicated by a gauge that fills up after every encounter, I am managing a fatigue system that allows only five to seven interviews per day. Lowering the stress level is easy, I just have to spend S-chips, the in-game currency that I periodically obtain through the ordeal. If only I had this fatigue system in real life, then the bitter taste of reality would not hit me so hard. Apart from Artem's birthday surprise, I am also powering through my mid-term examinations in law school. Unlike the in-game stress gauge, I cannot simply spend S-chips to ease my worries and lessen my fatigue. I cannot just pay my way out of physical and mental exhaustion. I only had the choice of pushing beyond my limits.

Of course, my examinations were tougher than I expected. Although I have a lesser academic load than usual, I still felt the weight of the difficulty push down on me. After a daily five to ten-minute break from preparing Artem's birthday surprise in Tears of Themis, I would spend the next couple of hours punching through difficult law provisions. After contacting audiences for one investigatory interrogation in Stellis, I then again, spent the succeeding hours memorizing the elements of various crimes punishable under the Revised Penal Code.

I think to myself the corollary truth: these exams erected huge roadblocks. I almost left blank answers if not for my capacity to type fast enough to type a slew of phrases. That's how online exams operate: you'd think they'd be easier than handwritten ones, but they're not. Despite preparing for the tests so much, I always felt unprepared, faced with an animal I have not encountered before: and the task is not only to identify what it is, but find a logical solution to capturing the wild creature. However, I also think to myself, how Kei and Artem have gone through this same dilemma before they went through the ruckus of legal studies and eventually emerged victorious.



Figure 1. Handwritten message for Artem at wouldulike cafe, Eastwood mall

The reward for doing menial and simple tasks for Artem's birthday turned out to be hearing his wistful words and receiving special souvenirs in return. But what about the rewards of taking an exam? Surely the best reward would be good scores, but that is too speculative. I thought I'd just reward myself with what I think I deserve.

Without hesitation, I actively went out to WouldULike cafe in Eastwood on April 27, 2022 (the day after my last exam) and took Artem's virtual celebration beyond Stellis. There, I was met with an Artem birthday shrine, pre-ordered meals solely for the event, and a message glassboard filled with heart-warming messages for Artem. There I wrote the words I will cherish in these days I will re-live forever: "Happy birthday Artem!!! Thank you for inspiring me to finish my law studies. -Kev" (see Fig 1.)

These simple yet sublime strings of words remind me of how Artem's birthday celebration coincided with a difficult portion of my life, and how I got through it thanks to the few (but meaningful) minutes I have spent in Stellis. And the three digital artifacts carry within (and by) them fragments of these bittersweet times.

Travel(ling) Far(away)

If I told anyone that I held (and timely renewed) my passport for over 10 years, they would probably ask me where I have flown to and what tourist destinations I have ticked off my bucket list. But my answer would probably disappoint them: I have never boarded an airplane in my life.

That is why virtually no one would probably believe me when I say that my Artem Sweet Tastes artifact is a souvenir from a trip abroad because that would defy all logic, would it not? If I had never flown coach or business before, how was I able to travel? The answer is simple: my (posthuman) self did. Artem's Sweet Tastes R card is utilized as a part of support cards for my Strong Deck, Revolving Deck, with its 2576 power and passive skill Progressive I which boosts defense in debates. It features Artem holding two ice cream cones in both hands, acting carefully so as not to have them melt and drip onto his hands.

To get this card in full 5-star power (i.e. getting five Sweet Tastes cards), I had to take the Artem route in the Romantic Rail Getaway event. The story prompt made me choose between Artem and Vyn, and I chose the former. The interactive story was split into five separate days, and each day was more memorable than the last. With a warm heart, I trace the days and map out the events that transpired during this 5-day trip

Day 1: What started as a normal day in Stellis turned out to be much more than that. Artem booked a windowside seat so that I could get a beautiful view of the countryside. He was dressed in a trenchcoat, fashionably worn over fancy vests and business casual attire. With great excitement sitting by his side, I get a glimpse of European-style houses and a forlorn bridge. At our first stop, we took the tour bus which took us to three destinations that thematically show artistry and romance. Towards the end, we ate at a Lombarda-style restaurant, and he picked our dishes for us. This trip sure is full of love.

Day 2: We arrive at Dilly Plaza, a place boasting quite several inspirational spots. There we found the Dilly Art Gallery and Wax Museum. While trekking along the brick roads, we encountered a lot of individuals who helped us navigate these busy streets. We even came across some scammers scalping tickets from other

tourists! What a shame! The day ended with a beautiful pop-up concert by the streetwalk, and we listened to wonderful melodies under a starlit sky.

Day 3: Kylos is our third stop, and this place had even more fidgety locals than before. Luckily, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and delicious food whiffed through our nostrils as the tour guide ushered us into the beautiful restaurants around the Kylos Plaza. As the day seemed bright for it, we decided to also visit the Umbra Castle known for its luscious natural scenery: a garden of plants and roses, and also the Culinary Museum.

Day 4: James River is our fourth destination where we arrived at a riverside scenic area overlooking the James Bridge. We also had to stroll along the James Central Business District and James Plaza. The Greenhouse Park was also a heartwarming part of our itinerary; it is here where Artem and I realized how great of a team we were. I will never forget how he took a picture of me underneath the scorching heat surrounded by green ferns and red flowers.

Day 5: I do not recall much of this day except visiting a local temple and a bridge. What I do remember most fondly about this day though was probably the most breathtaking view throughout the trip: Artem holding an ice cream melting by his hand. It was the same picturesque image of the Sweet Tastes souvenir, forever etched into my mind. What a way to end this trip.

Was I there, or was I just virtually there? Is there even a categorical difference? Is my absence considered a presence in the virtual? Imagine all of us players going through this same event. Alone. In our own home, tapping relentlessly on our phone. But I'd like to think we're not alone, rather we are alone together in this shared experience. So who's to say we weren't there if several people (i.e. non-players) were not there?

To say I thoroughly enjoyed this trip is an understatement. Under the bridge and over, I digitally and physically felt an intertwined relief, a satisfaction cut short when I noticed the battery died out soon after I finished Day 5. Well, I would not pursue Vyn's story anyway, might as well charge it. Through the darkness lit only by a bedside lamp, I see my reflection on the black glass in my hand, filled with the longing for more–the unspeakable lengths of the ungraspable. As I look outside my bedroom window peering into the tangerine hues and damp stones in my own home, I dream of being able to (physically) set foot on a luxury train bound for the vast unknown with the one(s) I love.

<u>In (Khaimit's) Desert(lands)</u>

Heavy is the finger that obtained the artifacts from the limited-time event “Secrets of the Tomb” not because of its mass but because of the responsibility it has borne in its tip: a blotch of indelible ink to signify that I have voted. One could say that the acquisition of these artifacts falls under an important part of my democratic identity as a Filipino voter, and what joy would it have brought me had the elections been as I hoped, but maybe that is why we don't throw coins into a well anymore.

The grueling election season has now come to a close and today is the day I get to vote. I remember thinking: today is the day we get to win; a victory against disinformation. I have never been so wrong.

I glanced at my phone; it read 7 o'clock. I am excited to paint my country in pink. At the precinct, it was pretty uneventful; peculiarly, several precincts in the Philippines are situated in Public School classrooms where we have honed our developing minds. Within this learning, space turned electoral voting room, what unfolds? The answer is simple: the blending of the past (institutionalized learning) and the present (exercising one's voting rights). Did the Filipinos learn well enough in the past (classroom) to make tough and fair choices in the present (elections)? The answer came later into the night when the uncoiling and unraveling transpired.

Instagram saw it first: a picture of my ink-stained finger. Yes, I have voted, and yes I have learned better. With this not-so-photogenic digit, I decided to pull for the ‘Overflowing Thoughts’ Luke SSR Card. It currently holds a power of 3732 and possesses three great passive skills utilized in primary debates. It stands within Strong Deck, Favorite Deck, and Revolving Deck as a hard-hitting main front.

Meanwhile, the other two artifacts, the Roaring Sands Badge and the Desert Road Invitation, were obtained later in the evening. These digital artifacts came into my possession shortly after accomplishing the final set of tasks in the Secrets of the Tomb event, and spending some Khaimit coins I got from digging through treasure in the event's mini-game. The badge description reads: "Amidst boundless golden sand, who will watch over the ancient secrets?" That is my question for my fellow Filipinos too, adding only a slight modification: Who is watching over our ancient secrets?

While I was actively excavating rocks and stones in search of gold nuggets and historical artifacts underneath rock formations in Khaimit, my fellow Filipinos were excavating their version of the truth amidst the debris of fake news. While I was actively living in an alternate version of modern-day Egypt in Khaimit, my fellow Filipinos were (almost virtually) living in an alternate version of Philippine history, where perception is (apparently) everything and the truth is (supposedly) relative.

Evening came quickly and the precincts were closing. Filipinos were on the verge of vanquishment: malfunctioning vote counting machines, rigging and vote-buying issues, and electoral violence in some parts of Mindanao. All I can think about is: what the hell is happening? Looking back, I should have treated it as a premonition.

When the results were being canvassed on TV, horror consumed my whole body. My prospective candidate, who has shown what great lengths good governance can take us, is quickly losing her numbers. By dusk, I already knew my future was not as rose-colored as I hoped it would be.

I locked myself in my room, browsing through social media, searching for any glimpse of hope amidst the cataclysm. We have fought this battle hard, but it already felt like we already lost the moment we began. I found nothing.

As I glance into the night sky, holding Khaimit digital artifacts in my pocket, I start to see it as clear and bright as the moon in a desert view. Tomorrow is not a rose-colored pavement, but a red-stained path. Shooting stars did not chance upon the sky that night, but I earnestly hoped they would. I am trying to find the reason why comets did not come as frequently as they did, maybe they had a good enough reason not to. If a burning star fell from the heavens that night, in the vivid imagery of YOASOBI I'd say:

刹那に輝いた無慈悲な流れ星	(The merciless shooting star shined for an instant)
祈りはただ届かずに消えた	(and disappeared without answering my prayers)
この、手の中で燃え尽きた	(Burned out in this hand is)
金色の優しい彗星を	(A golden, gentle comet)
美しいたてがみを	(Its beautiful mane)
暗闇の中握り締めた	(I clenched in the darkness)

And yes, the Khaimit souvenirs transformed from being simply just keepsakes into mementos of defeat.

Materializing the (recent) past

Deconstructing the relational and processual relation of the select pieces from my digital artifact collection in *Tears of Themis* illustrated the histories and cultural underpinnings that encompass my recent past as a posthuman Filipino in the first half of 2022. The anatomization of the digital artifacts entailed a recognition of the blended realities in which it is condensed: specifically, that the in-game artifacts carry both the in-game context that surrounds the object and the social context (and realities) that I, the object owner, experienced when the acquisition took place. From the memory vignettes, three deductions materialize: first, that memory and personal history from digital artifacts are linked largely by affective embedding and perception; second, that digital artifacts from gacha games represent the ideological model of the economy of desire and the posthuman experience in a gamespace; and third, that digital artifacts can be understood from two perspectives: from the game's usage and the player's own experience with it.

All the stories from preparing Artem's birthday surprise during my exams, obtaining Artem's Sweet Tastes card while not having traveled by myself, and getting the Khaimit mementos during the 2022 Philippine National Elections, stem from the experiences intertwined with the acquisition of objects. These narratives are perceived by and through the digital objects thanks to an offshoot of projecting myself onto my *Tears of Themis* character Kei. By placing myself in her shoes, I can situate myself in the first-person perspective and co-experience all of these events with and through her. This projection is possible because of the relational aspect of gacha games (Woods, 2022).

The select pieces from my digital artifact collection fall under what Ellersdorfer (2021) described as "anchors of memory" (Ellersdorfer, 2021, p. 6; Stockhammer; 2020, p.42); however, there is a slight dissimilarity in what points consider the re-telling of the past. For Ellersdorfer (2021), the ties to the past can be seen in the materiality of the object: in its wears and tears, in its historical production, in its discoloration, and its real-world utilization coupled with perception. Proposing a critical challenge to this, my digital artifacts blend the memories not in their physicality but in what player value I ascribed to the digital object. Absent any affective embedding and perception linked to the object, memories seem to drift away when salvaged from it.

Artem and Luke are characters designed to be relatable, admirable, and likable, in every sense of those words, and thus possessed qualities which merited my affective embedding. The way their personalities and aesthetics are designed based on East Asian ideals touched on several cultural matrices of my aesthetic appreciation. Their character archetype and design capitalized on my nostalgia for

anime culture. In the Philippines, Japanese cartoons called *anime* have been pervasive since the early 2000s (Bravo, 2012), incidentally the period of my developmental youth. Because of this transnational reception of anime culture in the Philippines, anime established a cultural phenomenon in the Philippines through Japanese language and subject appreciation, Filipino popular media culture, and Filipino cosplay culture, among others (Bravo, 2012). On a personal level, *anime influenced* my appreciation of the Japanese visual culture's artistic style of cute, beautiful, and attractive visually drawn characters, effectively solidifying them as my perceived aesthetic ideal and standard for visual culture.

Beyond a wistful recollection of childhood exposure, Artem and Luke's design also taps into the cultural point of my postcolonial identity. Underneath the surface, my identity is largely (but not fully) xenocentric in a way that our country is molded by the State despite our multicultural and multiethnic population (Bankoff &Weekley, 2017). In his dissertation entitled *Text and Transformation*, Lacson (2004) explained that reconfiguring the postcolonial identity in the Philippines necessitated an understanding of the Filipinos' culture of poverty, propensity to splinter, incredible absence of credible leaders, and historical despoliation. Succinctly, the postcolonial Filipino has a weak sense of national identity and an impactful dissociation and disconnect from history. One might wonder why, despite my country having strained relations with Japan during the Japanese occupation in World War II where several Filipino women were sexually assaulted, a globalized anime culture permeated the Philippines and directly onto my visual aesthetic appreciation. Lacson's (2004) findings provide a modest answer to this peculiarity: "[a]nything that happened before the Marcos dictatorship does not seem to have any relevance to Filipinos today" (p. 223). As a postcolonial Filipino, I am drawn to an assortment of different transnational cultural media: indie Filipino films, Japanese animation, Chinese video games, Korean pop music, manhwa, and American television shows, to name a few. Such an assemblage mimics an incredible disconnect from historical hostilities against events of the past. This is the postcolonial virus laying dormant within me: regardless of what strained relations our countries had before, I still maintain a healthy relationship with the new media they present to me.

Yet, memory anchorage to digital artifacts all comes back to character design (i.e. the aesthetic of Japanese visual culture and soft masculinity). This almost-perfect mixture of different aesthetics, culturally-specific masculine traits, and the incredibly vibrant and relatable back story makes up the qualities that have compelled me to effectively embed values into the characters and, in turn, emotionally charge the digital objects obtained about the character's events and narrative. Stroking my disposition toward Japanese anime culture and nudging my postcolonial lack of a conceivable national identity, *Tears of Themis* reconstructed characters that bear my perceived aesthetic ideal of light-skinned tall and slender figures and soft masculinity characterized by anti-hegemonic traits (Hong, 2021). The supplementary socio-economic matrix touched upon by these relational characters and digital souvenirs is my player participation within a digital culture of desire and pleasure which will be discussed later on.

Apart from connecting several cultural underpinnings of my thought process, *Tears of Themis* characters effectively resonate with me on a personal level too. The fictional background stories of the characters build the foundation of why I

perceive them in a positive light. Artem, as a hardworking lawyer, struggled immensely to gain prestige. In retrospect, he inspired me to be motivated in my legal studies because of his dedication to the profession. I relate to his chosen line of work because that is what I hope to achieve; I admire Artem's passion for justice. Luke is also working in the field of investigation, but his work is private and catered only to a few specific clients. This, too, falls under my relativity because I am a huge fan of detectives and mysteries. My penchant for solving puzzles made Luke's backstory all the more appealing. After all, Woods (2022) explained that gacha game characters are not just descriptive interfaces and drawings, but a representation of human integration into aspects of new technology (Apperly & Clemens, 2017). Simply put, the characters are built with their perceivable agency outside the player's control; they possess an evocative lifelike back-story where they act in their fictional capacity. Through these mimetic subplots coupled with Japanese visual design, the characters of *Tears of Themis* are now presented within *Stellis* as interactive sprites with completely fictional agencies that respond directly to my choices, actions, and movements. Artem and Luke are more than just a string of code attached to visual images; they are built as avatars with perceivable and interactive positive qualities within a gamespace ruled by an economy of desire and are thus a magnet of relationality (Woods, 2022) to which I effectively gravitated.

Because of my affective embedding of Artem and Luke's characters, I can attach sentimental value to the digital objects appendaged to my homosocial interactions with them. As if viewing the digital semantics of objects, I assigned a meaning to the digital artifacts, tied directly to its manifest image, and not its (im)materiality per se. In other words, the recollection is made because of the context surrounding the acquisition of the object and what it signifies from my point of view.

This perception speaks partly true to what Ellerdorsfer (2021) explained as "the way [objects] are perceived cannot be separated from our context" (p. 7). Borrowing largely from Stockhammer's (2020) idea, Ellersdorfer (2021) discussed the particularity of the narratives encountered in objects as products of perception and experiences where changeability is underscored. According to Stockhammer (2020), our perception of things changes over time causing things to inevitably (de)mystify. Looking back, this is what recalling memories from my collection entailed: a recalibration of my perception. Instead of merely referring to the narratives within *Stellis*, I also remembered the off-game instances that came with it. Since our past is largely mediated by the present (Ellersdorfer, 2020), I positioned every digital artifact memory-extraction from the present reading. Although the experiences remain the same, the sense of significance either grows or dims depending on the changing of the tides; what memories I might perceive of them now will most probably not be the same several years from now. However, the way my digital objects are perceived in the present is where I found a strong link with memories of the recent past. Because of my current perception of these things, I was able to retrieve otherwise furloughed echoes of my recent past. When tied with the object's value sparked by affective embedding, perception plays a significant role in linking the memories to the digital objects.

Simply put, there begins to be an 'occurrence of things' which Ellerdorsfer (2021) noted as the processual nature of the object. Because of the changing context of perception of the object-owner, the memories associated with the object spatially

and temporally change in meaning (Ellersdorfer, 2021). Apart from bearing only in-game values, these objects and artifacts are now situated under my socio-political conditions and historical conjuncture; while the in-game narratives inscribed therein have juxtaposed themselves with my off-game encounters coupled with cultural underpinnings.

Primarily, what these objects from my digital artifact collection essentially signify is the totality of the economy of desire (Woods, 2022), the economy of pleasure (Hong, 2021), and the posthuman identity that is created by the gacha gamespace. At different capacities, the cards, invitations, and badges act both as vestiges of the gacha gamespace and as a token of nonhuman (digital) experiences.

The memories unsheathed from the affectively charged digital objects include both in-game and off-game experiences because of the entanglement of my actual self and my digital self. Wilde (2020) stated that this posthuman subjectivity is not merely mechanical but an awareness of "our constantly intra-connected and transient relationship with our environment and others within it, both human and nonhuman" (p.1). To illustrate the experiences in the digital world means to speak of a larger context of my identity as a 21st-century human with a technologized self accessed through my mobile phone. Gourlay (2015) describes this complex relation by explicating how a digital device and nonhuman agency disrupt the binaries between text, author, device, and user. Me and my digital identity are not mutually exclusive of one another: we are the same, entangled by an invisible string of mediated connection(s), represented by the digital artifacts we share in our possession. Corresponding with Stojnic's (2021) descriptive dissection of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s climactic resolve, my posthuman self transpired a coextension "existing not as disparate subjects attempting to connect, but as a self-sufficient flow of consciousness" (p.40).

As a steady stream of posthuman consciousness, I am procedurally experiencing in both human and nonhuman capacities the stories narrated by the digital artifacts. When I access the Khaimit collection, I recall not only the Secrets of the Tombs event tasks of archaeological excavation but also the Philippine National Elections. When I retell the story of Artem's Romantic Rail Getway, I also appraise my lack of travel experiences. When I divulge my sweet memories of participation in Artem's birthday event, I cannot help but also recall the bitter feelings about my 4th Year Second Semester mid-term law school examinations.

Similar to how Wilde (2020) described how a person is constantly changed, affected, and mediated by human and nonhuman things, I perceive these select pieces from my artifact collection as influential aspects of the "posthuman-that-is-me" (p.10). In recalling what memories are found within my artifact collection, I am reminded of a specific moment of both my in-game and off-game experiences: of being comforted in Stellis during my exams, of being able to travel to another place without leaving my doorstep, and of being a voter amid a pressing National Election with Khaimit souvenirs in my bag. These visibilities of blending the real and the virtual are solidified and illustrated by what the artifacts present within its contextual acquisition.

Woods (2022) indirectly described posthumanism in discussing how the relationality of characters in gacha games "prompts the player to engage with their characters in ways that go beyond the game" (p.10). Even though the author spoke of cosplaying events and other similar modes, I speak from experience in the same

vein: my mediated self has chosen to celebrate and interact with the physical Artem event that is happening in a nearby city next to mine. It is because I have elucidated how these digital artifacts were used and what motivations prompted the acquisition of these artifacts from my collection that one starts to see their unbiased and unperturbed history of use and the memories found in their (im)materiality. I also speak largely of my off-game context, evident in the recollection of the 2022 National Elections intertwined with the acquisition of Khaimit artifacts and my juxtaposed travels within *Stellis* even though I have not mobilized myself.

By illustrating how affective embedding and character relationality motivate me to participate in the game events to get the digital artifacts, I have painted a picture of *Stellis* as being ruled by the "economy of desire" procuring its vernacular of "capitalist logic." (Woods, 2022, p.6). These artifacts are surrounded by relational characters and participation that is fueled by the investment of emotional capital. Spending five to ten minutes per day into characters to which I have effectively embedded myself, I can present how my efforts (to spend less than thirty minutes per day) are rewarded by the emotional satisfaction of finishing the task and being rewarded with interactions with Artem, with digital souvenirs, and with fragmented digital experiences. Fundamentally, the digital artifacts serve as a souvenir of these interactions that I have sought, all premised within a desire-driven economy. I found the motivation from my desire to collect these objects related to the characters I like and from the pleasure of having these digital artifacts in my possession as a remembrance. In a way, retelling the story of what these three digital artifacts cost to obtain (my effort, my time, and my emotion) showed the blending of economies of desire and pleasure that are involved in gacha games: if you would want to acquire this object, then you have to participate in these events which requires time and energy. Within this capitalist logic, my motivations have compelled me to invest part of my time and emotional capital just to get the virtual things. I have also invested in-game currency as capital to obtain the Overflowing Thoughts SSR card by spending roughly around 14400 S-chips and the Desert Road Invitation by paying 32000 Khaimit Coins. This exchange of goods through emotional investment or actual spending of in-game currency definitively illustrates a capitalist logic. Significantly, what this gamespace presents is how social relationships are marketed by *Stellis'* gentrified ecology of desire and pleasure, and what better representation of this economy than the actual in-game rewards from this emotional investment (i.e. the select pieces from my digital collection).

Lastly, my autoethnographic snippets revealed how the digital objects in a gacha game function much like an heirloom in their capacity to be of different meanings for each different possessor (Lillios, 1999; Ellersdorfer, 2021). However, the digital artifacts' only difference is that they pass only in one generation: from game developer to player. Thus, since my gacha game artifacts can only be passed from game to me, as a player, but does not hinder other players from obtaining the artifacts, the archaeological recording of digital artifacts in the gacha ludic design can be visualized as follows:

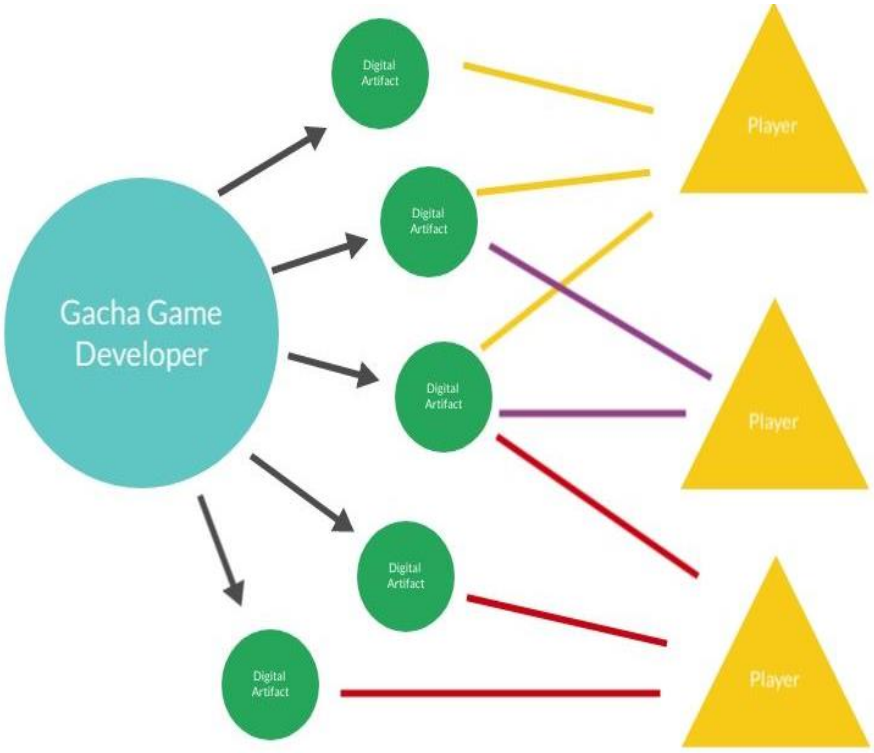


Figure 2. Archaeological network of gacha game digital artifacts

The gacha game developer is the sole source of the digital artifacts, and each artifact is attached with its in-game context, lore, and mechanic. However, these artifacts are owned by players in different supervening capacities based on their choice to participate in the events, manner of obtaining, and value. Each differently colored line (red, yellow, and purple) represents a player's collection of digital artifacts, upon which each of them has attached different meanings to the objects apart from in-game context into a story, memory, and meaning of their own. In this way, digital artifacts can be archaeologically understood as intermediary artifacts between in-game context and off-game context. Lillios (1999) describes this transmission from one person (in this context, a game developer) to another (in contemporary applications, gacha game players) as a form of disposition: whereby the owner relinquishes the ownership of the thing and grants it to another (in this case, to several players) to transmit status, rank, or historical significance. In the same way, the gacha player, myself, has acquired possession of the objects as I have attached significantly new histories to them. Like the variables of tension between "competing sources of identity and rank that ultimately generates the conditions that lead to the use and circulation of heirlooms," (Lillios, 1999, p. 256), these digital artifacts are transmitted based on the tensions between affective embedding, player perception, and motivation as exemplified by my auto-archaeological recollection. The tension between what I can do, what my resources are, and what I choose to do for these artifacts dictates if these artifacts are worthy of my possession and effort to obtain. Thus, to understand how digital artifacts may be explained in the Southeast Asian context, the player’s side of the archaeological analysis must be underscored. Because of the disposition of the objects from COGNOSPHERE to its player, the digital artifacts become part of the objects

owned by Southeast Asians, regardless of their origin; and it is thus best archaeologically understood and recorded as part of the objects owned by 21st-century posthuman South East Asians with digital identities of their own. This transmission decontextualizes the artifacts from its game-specific lore and into the hands of possessors from Southeast Asia—in my context, as a Filipino. After all, Lillios (1999) explained that it is when heirlooms are stopped from circulation that their archaeological recording must commence. Similarly, since the artifacts from *Tears of Themis* end up in the possession of each player once transmitted (and are stopped from further circulation except when re-introduced by the game developer), their archaeological recording (such as illustrated by my auto-archaeology) must be launched.

Conclusion

In all of their official *Tears of Themis* social media channels, COGNOSPHERE commemorates the 1st anniversary of the release of the mobile game's global server by writing that "This little keepsake conveys the feelings he has had for you this past year, as well as his hope for the future" (*Tears of Themis* [@tearsofthemisen], 2022, July 2016). As this social media post suggests, the game developers acknowledged that these virtual objects that the players receive from the game are keepsakes of memories. The developers of the game recognize that these objects act as vestiges of the past and possess a representational capacity. Such is a piecemeal reverberation with Ellersdorfers' (2021) auto-archaeological significance of memory and Woods' gacha game findings. If new media such as *Tears of Themis* aptly recognizes the importance of the memories stored within the digital artifacts (consistent with archaeological theory and game studies), so should we, as (post)humans of the contemporary past occupying various virtually constructed worlds, look at virtual objects as sources of personal and social memory.
On another note, Ellersdorfer (2021) explained that:

> "[it]is unlikely that if anyone else were to look at [her] postcards that they would be able to decipher their significance to [her], in much the same way that [she] can only really imagine the experiences that they signify for [her] mother."

The same rings true from the auto-archaeology of my digital artifact collection. I am the only one capable of deriving an accurate and precise reading of my digital artifact collection's importance and role in my complicated life which is a network of posthumanism, postcolonialism, childhood nostalgia, and sociopolitical context. It is unlikely that a future archaeologist, who would probably unearth my digital collection, may be able to accurately decipher the memories encapsulated within them, the relational perception I have with the characters who accorded me the motivation to acquire these artifacts, and the representation that these artifacts signify to me, much less even access these digital artifacts from my phone. Thus, this case study revealed how vastly significant the auto-archeological analysis of digital objects is, considering that it allows a personal reflection on artifacts owned by the object-owner himself/herself/themselves. This case study also emphasized the importance of the narrative enshrined within my digital artifacts, in that they may represent the gacha game economy, my posthuman

identity, and my recent past by providing a linkage between personal and social history.

At the core of the memory retrieval from these artifacts from my *Tears of Themis* digital collection, three notable points emerged. One is that memories within digital objects are anchored on the value attached to them as a reverberation of affective embedding and perception. Because my memories of the objects are tied to why and how I obtained the object, it is apparent that my player-perceived value brought about by effective embedding helped coalesce the memories inscribed in each of the digital artifacts from both in-game and off-game circumstances. Second is that the digital artifact collection represents the posthuman identity which not only has the sole capacity to access these artifacts but also a continued presence in affecting both in-game and off-game circumstances. By having access to these artifacts primarily using my credentials to log in to the game itself, my digital self is the one (virtually) touching these artifacts. In turn, this propagates my identity as someone posthuman, possessing a technologized self occupying *Stellis*, a virtual world, but also mechanically controlled by a real self, occupying the human world. These artifacts represented the bigger picture of my post-humanity as they tended to meld memories from the real and the virtual. In a larger context, the artifacts also represent the economy of desire and pleasure that creates capitalist logic within gacha games (Woods, 2022) because these virtual artifacts are obtained through different personal motivations derived from the investment of emotional capital. Third is that a digital artifact collection may be archaeologically understood through a network of disposition (from game developer to player), functioning like an heirloom as an artifact that is relinquished from its owner's context to another owner's context, effectively bridging two artifact-center histories: that of the game's context and that of the player's off-game context. With this new model of rethinking digital artifacts and memory, the researcher recommends efforts into archaeologically reporting digital artifacts owned by players in different archaeogaming contexts; in particular, in-game artifacts owned by Southeast Asians in vastly bigger contexts.

> *"**He Zhiwu, Cop 223**: If memories could be canned, would they also have expiry dates? If so, I hope they last for centuries."*
>
> - Chungking Express (1993), (dir. Wong Kar-wai)

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