

Proceedings from the Document Academy

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Proceedings from the 2023 FanLIS
Symposium*

Article 7

2023

Data Lost, Forbidden or Controlled?: The Archivists of Horizon Forbidden West

Ashley Lanni
University of Toronto, ashleylanni@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam>



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Lanni, Ashley (2023) "Data Lost, Forbidden or Controlled?: The Archivists of Horizon Forbidden West," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/10/1/7>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol10/iss1/7>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by University of Akron Press Managed at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings from the Document Academy by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

In post-apocalyptic fiction, ancient knowledge and materials are almost as valuable as currency, if not currency outright. Given the way information moves in these systems, how can science fiction help us understand the ethical quandaries and responsibilities of information professionals? More specifically, how can the information systems we find in these worlds help us think about the politics of archiving and the responsibility information professionals have towards society? By focusing on the different groups and their archival practices within the world of *Horizon Forbidden West*, we can showcase how the most empowering and socially responsible archival practices are tied to making archives both accessible and diverse, providing the greatest social good through accountability and showing as many people as possible the complex nature of humanity and the world.

For the uninitiated, *Horizon Forbidden West* is a video game that takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States some 1000 years after an event called the Faro Plague, an event wherein 21st century humans created machines that consumed all organic species. The game's protagonist, Aloy, is one of the few people aware of the forces that shaped the current world due to her Focus, a wearable miniature computer, which lets her interact with ancient technology and store records for future use. In *Horizon Forbidden West*, Aloy's main goal is to restore Gaia, the AI that once saved life on earth, in order to help recalibrate the planet's ecosystems that are slowly falling into disequilibrium, and in doing so thwart the members of Far Zenith, a group of immortal billionaires from the 21st century that wish to destroy the current Earth for their own gains, eliminate all life currently on it, and use their own version of the AI to create a world that only they will dwell in (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021).

What is different about Aloy versus other cultural groups, or "tribes" as they are called in-game, is the way she interacts with the past and its technology. Many in the world treat the ruins of the past as dangerous and do not attempt to understand them or the past they represent, fearful of destructive or corruptive influences. Some, like the Nora, banning their members outright from interacting with ancient technologies. Aloy is exceptional because of her curiosity towards and use of technology, in many ways seeking out information and records to improve her understanding of the world. She is indiscriminate with her appraisal and keeping of the information she finds, operating under a principle of scarcity not unlike early archivists of antiquities and medieval records, wherein everything is of equal value due to the difficulty of finding materials (Cook, 2011, p. 625). There is no discarding of any information that she obtains about the old world, whether it is audio recordings about Gaia's construction or an ad for a popular Massive Multiplayer Online Game (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021). It is through this collector impulse that she can be viewed as an archivist in the first place, even if her initial collection mentality does not go beyond this individualistic and indiscriminate use.

In many ways, Aloy initially functions as any personal collector would, in that her records act more as a self-reflection of her interests mixed with items relevant to her world-saving or community helping work. It is a record of her personal journey through the world, treated thematically in-game as a reflection of her curious nature and a practical means to revisit findings. Aloy dedicates time and resources to go beyond her “institutional” world saving confines and responsibilities to find new documents and information, in line with what Richard J. Cox and Helen W. Samuels regard as improving the retention of documents of value (1998, p. 41). She asks what information is missing and seeks out documents or artifacts that might fill in that gap (Cox and Samuels, 1988, p. 31). At first, she acts like others in her unwillingness to share these documents directly with others. She keeps all this information to herself, skeptical about others interacting with the information out of a distrust of their capacity to understand, and thus sharing only that which is immediately relevant to others when performing joint tasks. Aloy’s access approach changes as she gains companions to help her save the world. Rather than limit their access and make herself sole controller of the documents, she provides them with the means and training necessary to handle records individually and add to them. It is this open access approach that allows Aloy’s companions to grow, shaping their interactions with the world, its past and even helping them develop ways to save it. Shared information about the past of the Tenakth helps Varl, who initially views them as a violent and irrational group who should be avoided, to approach and befriend Kotallo, another party member. Discovered history about the human past even helps members of the group better understand the values of the societies they were raised in, as these groups based their ideologies on remnants of the pre-apocalyptic society. A society-saving example can be found when Zo builds a code to reactivate the Plowhorns, a farming machine crucial for the Utaru’s survival, which had broken down from years of wear and tear that the Utaru had no prior means to fix (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, The Second Verse quest). Ultimately, what comes to set Aloy and her allies apart in *Horizon Forbidden West* is their willingness to share information with one another and others, as well as educate an increasing number of people on how to use the means needed to access their expanding record system.

In contrast, Tilda, who is a member of Far Zenith, is defined by her own art archive, yet is an example of what can happen if an archivist never goes beyond the personal. Tilda’s gallery, replete with famous paintings, sculptures and even forgeries from the artistic Golden Age of her Dutch homeland, is meant more as a microcosm of her personal history than as a vault for the preservation of great historical works. While given to her by other museums with long-term preservation in mind, it is evident in the way she ties each artwork to her own personal achievements that she does not value these works for their historical contributions. For example, she links one forgery with her 21st century deep fake identification

software, a painting depicting Jeremiah at the fall of Jerusalem to herself witnessing the earth's destruction, and a Van de Velde boat painting to her venturing into the unknowns of space (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, All That Remains interlude quest). Each piece clearly speaks to her own personal experiences while also reflecting her own understanding of humanity's weaknesses; she doesn't educate others on each painting's full history or artistic relevance, despite seeming to have such knowledge. In other words, she biasedly selected artworks for personal enjoyment while working under the guise of preserving them for future humanity.

Tilda's gallery is reminiscent of the self-reflection found in the predecessors of museum spaces, such as the "Wunderkammern", "studioli", and other princely galleries of the early-modern period (Jong, 2013, p. 73). As put by Steffi de Jong, in these pre-museum spaces "the collected objects were arranged as miniature representations of the [prince's] world and as symbols of the prince's power." They "symbolically claimed dominion over a world" that the owner, typically nobility, presided over, "with [themselves] positioned at its center" (Jong, 2013, p. 74). Collecting in these spaces was less about preserving art and more about ego and self-aggrandizement. Tilda reflects this sentiment, as her collection was meant to sit in a vault and be used only to impress Tilda's inner circle. The artifacts therefore act in service of Tilda's idea of herself as a visionary, reflecting her own history and not the world's. Thus, her archive never goes beyond the personal and remains a highly selective space unintended for the public despite its valuable collection. It is a monument to herself rather than a true archive, with no social purpose or users to serve.

In contrast, Aloy and her allies are an example of archivists who prioritize social responsibility when dealing with the communities around them. Archives are tasked with being trustworthy sources for ensuring accountability, memory, and social justice, acting as both institutional record holders and functional resources for their users. As Randall Jimerson states, archives' responsibility is "to document and serve all groups within society," and, by doing so, also "represent [their] full spectrum of opinion and experience" (2013, p. 339). When tied to serving the general public, this mandate takes on a special importance as archivists have the potential to hold their institutions accountable for their mistakes by keeping a paper trail of activities for the public or auditors to access and do research with (Jimerson, 2013, p. 343). If an archival institution serves a cultural function, such as preserving items that reflect the legal, economic or lived reality of a social group, then the responsibility of an archivist is to ensure a balance in documentation, and therefore diverse points of view that reflect lived reality. Aloy and her group are examples of this balanced approach because they seek out documents that might provide different perspectives from those they were socialized with. For example, during a side quest to find information to help restart a flood-control system in the Quen Empire, Aloy's companion Alva discovers that one of her tribe's revered and

deified Ancestors was willing to sacrifice people's lives for scientific progress. Despite how that fact would upend her people's worldview and lead to retribution, she does not stop seeking out more information, unlike the Diviner archivist previously assigned to the task. Out of fear of being punished for encountering negative information about an Ancestor, he gave up on the mission and tries to discourage others from picking up where he left off. He prioritizes the Quen's idealization of the past over the facts, however harmful, about the people who shaped it. However, Alva does not shy away from new information or suggest stopping the mission, instead she considers their findings valuable because they show a different view of the person involved and complicate their history (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, Forbidden Legacy quest). Unlike other members of her tribe who refuse to engage with this worldview-defying information, Alva keeps these records and passes their information onto other Quen after the end of the game. Holding the past and its people accountable, therefore, and including different perspectives are as much a part of her work ethic as collection, unlike others amongst her people.

However, accountability, diversity and memory are concepts not only about what is preserved by an archive but how it is used. If an archive is meant to record institutional information and act as a record of reality, it must also, by necessity, be accessible for review. As put by the archivist Mark Greene, archivists "should do everything [they] legally, ethically, and practically can do to promote, ease, and sustain use by whomever [their] user groups happen to be" (2009, p. 34). In other words, they must welcome use, as it is inquiry and engagement that makes the archive valuable and powerful. Aloy and her allies, as amateur archivists, begin to embody this principle increasingly more as the story progresses. By the game's conclusion, the group has returned to their different home tribes to spread the use of Focus, and to begin teaching people how to decipher the documents and records contained within their database. At different points in the game, Aloy even helps bridge technological gaps she encounters to ensure others have greater access to information. For example, she provides Alva, who has an older and technologically weaker model of Focus, with software upgrades that allow her to access the same quality and quantity of information as Aloy while out in the field (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, Seeds of the Past quest). Rather than keep the information to themselves and act as experts and gatekeepers, Aloy and her group try to increase their user base so that others might engage with the documents, artifacts and general information they have collected.

Aloy's celebration of information access is contrasted with the Quen's, who enforce strict control over what information can be accessed by users and what records should be retained. The Quen empire, unlike most of the other tribes and cultures seen in the game, are open to technology and encourage its use, using whatever information is found to strengthen their dominion. Being able to use

Focuses, the Quen have developed a more sophisticated view of the past, which they call The Legacy, and its most famous scientific figures, whom they call the Ancestors (Zanden, 2023). While they are more open to technology and its use in improving agriculture, weaponry, transport, etc., their approach differs from Aloy's allies when it comes to general access. Only those who pass civil exams to become Diviners are permitted to use a Focus and access the information it provides, so the general population never knows the full details of the Legacy or even how to use technology, outside of selected professional training. ("Horizon Forbidden West: Story of Alva (Sodding Superhero, 2022, 30:00–30:43) Even amongst the Diviners, there is no unlimited access to all collected information; instead, knowledge is shared on a need-to-know basis. Furthermore, the state's bureaucratic Board of Overseers not only direct Diviner activities but determine what information should be appraised and stored, and what information is "Forbidden"¹ and thus blocked from view (Sodding Superhero, 2022, 23:00–24:30).

The way in which information about the Legacy is treated by Diviners is telling of the Quen's mentality towards information. Knowledge is seen as something attained through effort and must be deserved. For example, Alva mentions that the Quen's quest to reach Legacy's Landfall, the post-apocalyptic remnants of San Francisco, will allow the Diviners to "earn the knowledge [they] need to save [their] people." (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, Seeds of the Past Quest) Knowledge and documents are not only found through discovery, research, and processing, but clearly earned through a Diviner's service, trust and reliability. Diviners are inoculated quickly to the idea that their role is of vital importance to the empire's survival; Alva mentions Diviners are tasked to "interpret the wisdom of [the] Ancestors for the good of all. And to keep it safe." (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, Seeds of the Past quest) Thus, their role is to preserve information that is tied to the Legacy and ensure it is kept safely away from those who might "misuse" it to the Quen's detriment. This fits well with the idea that any information found by a Diviner, and more importantly approved by the Board, is the only "truth" found within the historical record. There is no room for nuance or information that would complicate the Legacy, and certainly no documents to counter it. Therefore, it is believed that Diviners only speak "truth" because they are trained with only the Quen's version of reality in mind, serving their vision of social and cultural cohesion. As an arm of state control and record-keeping, it stands to reason that anyone who attempts to use a Focus who is not a Diviner is labeled as dangerous by the Empire's law enforcers, as they cannot be controlled and are not taught with those same Legacy-forward values. As seen with the DLC's deuteragonist Seyka, non-Diviner Focus users are not trusted to interpret the information according to Imperial rules or keep it appropriately hidden from others. In fact, those who come

¹ The term is one used by the Quen elite to reference materials that contradict the government's official narrative of the past.

in contact with this information are picked up by the Compliance Board, the Quen's version of a secret police, and either killed or imprisoned as they pose a potential risk to the empire. To that end, members of the Compliance Board are called "Risk specialists" and tasked with monitoring people who are suspected of harboring non-approved knowledge. The Quen elite seem generally to fear information falling into the wrong hands and serving some "ill" purpose, likely because it could destabilize the Quen's hierarchy and dominance (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2022, The Splinter Within quest).

From the aforementioned information, we can see that Diviners act as archivists within a rigid state hierarchy and preserve records according to its rules. Their function is as state actors gathering and sorting information for government purposes. In many ways, they reflect how archives function in a society where all information is controlled by those at the top of the social order. Historians have shown that archives' institutional origins were directly tied to a similar legitimizing of those in positions of power and effectively marginalized those outside of it (Cook, 2011, p. 621). European imperial powers generally used records, from maps to censuses to royal commission reports, to reinforce their own power by controlling the definition, naming and categorizing of their subjects into a specific social vision. They would classify the world according to their own assumptions and values, promoting hierarchical structures through records organized in levels of descending orders, with themselves on top (Cook, 2011, pp. 622–623). In much the same way, the Quen rely on hierarchies and rigid control of documents to legitimize the views of their own Imperial family and how their present world is structured. The Board of Overseers does not let Diviners process information unsupervised and punishes those who bring back incomplete or "Forbidden" information. (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2021, Expedition Protocol datapoint). They act as both managers and a censorship board, who "verify" found information and determine if a document is appropriate for accession depending on how it fits within the State's telling of events. If information is collected that contains negative information about any foundational historical figures, then they are immediately blocked from other Diviners and stricken from the record. For the elite, the social good is defined by the narratives they have built. Such rigid control is reminiscent of other governmental systems and their own archives, wherein documents that counter the state's definitions are censored or destroyed. Under Joseph Stalin, for example, the Soviet Union created a secretive archival department for written materials that were banned by the government. This department preserved the material but severely restricted access to it, taking items out of public circulation that contained stances that could be viewed as critical or counter to the political beliefs of that regime. (Markwick, 2013, pp. 7–8) In the game, the Quen operate under a similar principle. Through careful framing, the Quen reinforce their position as inheritors of their Ancestral world of sanctified entrepreneurs and

scientists, justifying their social dominance. With no documents to record the misdeeds of the past, complicate the tools its people left behind or challenge Quen hagiographic narratives, there is no way to counter the Quen ruler's view of the past or historical technologies they use.

To critique this control of information, the game glorifies Zero Dawn's APOLLO database as an idealized form of archiving, emphasizing how it was built as an open access tool to democratize information and provide diverse records. Containing 40 million digitized records, the database was designed to contain an almost complete record of all human knowledge, from science to languages to culture. The APOLLO archive is treated as a treasure within the game's world, envisioned as an opportunity to empower and equalize a nascent post-apocalyptic humanity through education and limitless information. It was meant to be accessible to all humans from a young age, with its knowledge shared according to learning speed and not societal position (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, 2017, APOLLO Update datapoint). As powerful spaces for accountability and knowledge, archives require active engagement by archivists to shape these institutions for the betterment of society (Jimerson, 2013, p. 343). The APOLLO archivists knew the amount of work necessary to promote, ease, and sustain use for the humans who came after them, their future users. They developed innovative ways to preserve records for thousands of years and processed millions of recommended records to determine what best reflected pre-apocalyptic human life for posterity (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, 2017, Encapsulated DNA datapoint). In doing so, they promoted the most social good, ensuring that their gargantuan effort to preserve these diverse records made it into future human hands, aided in the reconstruction of life on earth and the longevity of pre-apocalyptic humanity's memory. They accomplished what archivists are tasked with vis-à-vis their users, they "[created] an effective and efficient connection to [their] holdings, so that [their] users, whoever they are, can benefit from them to the fullest extent" (Greene, 2009, pp. 31–32). APOLLO accomplishes this in spades by allowing the greatest database access with the greatest variety of information to the greatest variety of users. While the APOLLO archive was ultimately lost to the people who it was intended for, having been destroyed by the CEO who created the earth-destroying machines to prevent posterity from learning of his actions, it is held up by the game's narrative as a devastating loss for the good it missed providing.

I would argue that Aloy and her allies act as quasi-inheritors of the idealized principles of the APOLLO archive mentioned above, where their collection of diverse records, emphasis on greater archival access and educational aims serve the greatest social good. By the game's end, Aloy and her allies are trying to hold the past to account and spread their knowledge to as many as they can, teaching others how to use database tools (Focuses) and effectively taking charge in setting up an entire system of information distribution. The game juxtaposes Aloy and her allies

from the Quen with Tilda in terms of their transparency, their desire to share knowledge and their interest in collecting documents outside of their personal interests or self-empowerment. In this sense, they act like the APOLLO archivists in aiming for the improvement and equalization of all of humanity through the democratizing of archival use. They use their power as archivists to ensure the betterment of the communities they serve. Given such, they act as examples for real-life archivists to emulate and hopefully can help them think critically about their own praxis.

References

- Cook, T. (2011). The archive(s) is a foreign country: Historians, archivists, and the changing archival landscape. *The American Archivist*, 74(2), 600–632. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23079052>
- Cox, R. J., & Samuels, H. W. (1988). The archivist's first responsibility: A research agenda to improve the identification and retention of records of enduring value. *The American Archivist*, 51(1/2), 28–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293193>
- de Jong, S. (2015). Mediatized memory: Video testimonies in museums. In S. Macdonald & H. R. Leahy (Eds.), *The international handbooks of museum studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118829059.wbihms304>
- Greene, M. A. (2009). The power of archives: Archivists' values and value in the postmodern age. *The American Archivist*, 72(1), 17–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294594>
- Sodding Superhero. (2022, February 27). *Horizon Forbidden West: Story of Alva (All Cutscenes/All Dialogues/Spoilers)* [Video]. <https://youtu.be/EaZmbBWfND0>
- Horizon Forbidden West* (PS4 Version) [Video Game]. (2021). Guerilla.
- Horizon Zero Dawn* (PS4 Version) [Video Game]. (2017). Guerilla.
- Jimerson, R. C. (2013). Archivists and Social Responsibility: A Response to Mark Greene. *The American Archivist*, 76(2), 335–345. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43490358>
- Markwick, R. D. (2013). Censorship and fear: Historical research in the Soviet Union. *Groniek*, 201: Angst. <https://ugp.rug.nl/groniek/article/view/22633>
- van der Zanden, A. (2023, April 6). *Get to know the Queen of Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores*. blog.playstation.com/2023/04/06/get-to-know-the-queen-of-horizon-forbidden-west-burning-shores/