ONCE UPON A TIME, THE GREATEST OF ALL MEDIA WAS BORN

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THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE HISTORIAN

The fundamental need of human beings to create order out of chaos and to make congruent the discordant nature of human experiences often leads historians to articulate history around COHERENT NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

(Ricoeur, 1983)

THE DESIRE FOR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Game historians build their narrative by:

- Choosing some events at the expense of others
- Categorizing them
- Articulating them in a particular way

(Loowood, 2014)

THE FASCINATION WITH THE MEDIUM

The fascination with the technical and commercial exploits of the medium encourages game historians to:

- act as "cheerleader"
- occult the negative aspects of the game industry

(Therrien & Picard, 201; Kline, 2014; Donovan, 2015: 13)

DEFINITION OF HISTORY

Field of knowledge based on the observation and description of past events that are considered WORTHY of mention.

(My translation, Petit Robert Dictionary)
Dominance of techno-industrial period markers (Donovan, 2015; Kline, 2014; Therrien & Picard, 2014)

The subjectivity of the historian

“Historians try, as much as possible, to erase what can betray the place from where they look, the moment when they exist, their bias, their inescapable passion. The historical sense, as Nietzsche describes it, does not refuse the system of its own injustice”

(My translation, Foucault, 2004: 412)

Presentation overview

- Draw on the vocabulary used by Elsaesser (2014) to categorize historical accounts of cinema
- Identify different narrative structures on the basis of which game history can be constructed
- Provide examples of historical accounts that rely on these structures
- Argue in favor of a foucauldian genealogical approach that better reflects the complexity of game history

The prehistory of video games

Two simplistic narratives revolving around the search for its “origins”:
1) tracing back a single inventor and dating the birth of the medium
2) “prelapsarian picture of creative chaos”

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)

Tracing back a single inventor and dating the invention of the medium

"Initially conceived by Steve Russell, Martin Graetz and Wayne Wiitanen in 1961, Spacewar! is considered one of the earliest video games for a digital computer. After MIT student Alan Kotok obtained sine and cosine routines from DEC, as shown in this letter from Margaret Wu, Steve Russell created the first version of Spacewar! in 1963. Significant improvements to the game were made in the spring of 1962 by Peter Samson, Dan Edwards and Martin Graetz."

Website: Computer History

Tracing back a single inventor and dating the invention of the medium

Thomas Goldsmith & Estle Ray
Inventors of the cathode-ray tube amusement device
1948

(Burnham, 2003)
Ralph Baer
Creator of the console
Magnavox Odyssey
1971

Nolan Bushnell & Ted Dabney
Co-founders of Atari
and instigators of Pong
1972

Source: Arsénault (2009)

Foucauldian geological approach

“What we find, at the historical beginning of things, is not the preserved identity of their origin – it is the discord of other things, the disparate”. The best thing to do is to “study meticulously the coincidences of the beginnings by excavating the lowest depths”

(My translation, Foucault, 2004: 394–398)
FOUCAULDIAN GEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Methodological or analytical approach which consist in rigorous investigations into the "HISTORICAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY" for broad cultural formations

(Koopman, 2012)

SEARCH FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE CREATION OF VIDEO GAMES

SEARCH FOR THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF VIDEO GAMES

THE HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES

Can be articulated around various narrative structures:

1. "chronological–teleological"
2. "chronological–organic"
3. "bi–polar"
4. "epistemic breaks"
5. "cyclical"

CHRONOLOGICAL–TELEOLOGICAL

• Linear progression toward a particular goal (Elsaesser, 2004: 80)
• Rhetoric of perpetual improvements and technological innovation (Therrien, 2012)

CHRONOLOGICAL–TELEOLOGICAL

• Increasing quality of the graphics
• Growing richness of game narrative
• More and more immersive gaming experiences
Chronological-Teleological


Chronological-Organic

Linear evolution that is similar to the evolution of a living being (birth, childhood, maturity, decline, rebirth)

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)

Chronological-Organic

Birth → Childhood → Maturity → Decline → Rebirth


Infancy → Precursors of the shooter → 1st shooter → Maturity → Space Invaders' clones → Decline → 1st side-scrolling game → Rebirth

Bi-Polar

"Dialectic of binary oppositions"

(Elsaesser, 2004: 100)
Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Primitive mode of representation VS Institutional mode of representation

(Kent, 2001)

Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Bi-polar

Epistemic Breaks

Radical transformations that push the medium into new phases of its evolution

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)
Ping Pong (Baur, 1945)

Space Invaders (Namco, 1978)

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (Atari, 1982)

Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985)

 Examples inspired by Therrien and Picard (2015)

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Epistemic Breaks

1978: Space Invaders

1979: Galaga

1980: Defender

1981: Xevious

1982: Galaga

1983: Xevious

1984: Galaga

1985: Defender

1992: Wolfenstein 3D

1993: Doom

1st First-person shooter

Example inspired by Arsenault (2009)
Cyclical

Revolves around tropes of return, appropriation, remediation, recycling and retrofitting

(Elsaesser, 2004: 79 and 100)
Cyclical


Self-reflexivity in Monkey Island 2

Action games
Action movies

Strategy games
Board games

RPGs
Fantastic literature
Pen-and-paper role-playing games
**GENEALOGICAL APPROACH**

- Continuity–with–discontinuity instead of epistemic break
- Networks of vectors that mutually influence each other instead of filiation
- Coexistence, overlap, interference, convergence, synergy, and contingency instead of opposition and cycle

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**GENEALOGY**

- Concerned by problems “found below the surfaces of our lives” that “feel impenetrable” and whose articulations “require a severe work of thought” and “painstaking patience” (Koopman, 2012)
- Looking for a network of multiple explanations and “mechanisms that are operating in different institutions” (Foucault in Koopman, 2012)

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**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENEALOGY AND ARCHEOLOGY**

Archeology describes “isolated slices of time, discontinuous from one to the next”, as if sets of practices and events were “static”, “motionless”, “frozen” in time (Koopman, 2012)

Genealogy is interested in their “fluid becoming”, in “historical processes of transition” and in “matrices of transformations” (Koopman, 2012)

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"The archaeological dimensions of the analysis made it possible to examine their own histories; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyze their formation out of the practices and the modifications undergone by the latter"

(Foucault in Koopman, 2012)
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Video games evolved in parallel with computers, toys, sports and playing habits

Multiple vectors in the history of domestic video games

- “Process through which the home is turned into a media center”
- Emergence of interactivity that “goes back far before the era of digital technology”
- Influence of the “widespread culture of radio amateurism and electrical tinkering”
  (Huhtamo, 2012)

Conjunction of multiple factors

- Saturation of the market
- Limited space in toys stores
- Commercialization of the video recorder

1983 Crash of the game industry

The failure of the game E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial is the consequence of the crash instead of its cause.
   (Donovan, 2015: 13, 19)

Parallel evolution

Shoot 'em ups

First-person shooters

1974 Maze War
1980 Horizons
1980 Rescue
1992 Galaga
1982 Defender
1982 Aliens
1985 Aliens

Focus on power-knowledge interplay

- Foucault’s archeologies focus on the domain of knowledge
- Foucault’s genealogies focus on the interplay between power and knowledge
Exclusion in historiographies

"If we ask the question about what has constantly been, through our discourses, the will to knowledge across so many centuries of our history [...] than it might be something like an exclusion system."

(Foucault, 1970: 18)

Game history androcentrism

• The history of video game is a "patrilineal chronicle [...] punctuated by sacred litanies of "founding fathers"

• The fact that videogame history is "all about the boys" is the "consequence of a certain mode of historical writing, preservation, memory"

(Nooney, 2012)

Omission of girls' game

Pink games
Purple games

Omission of women in the history of computer

Mathematician Ada Lovelace: 1815-1852

Omission of women game designers

Roberta Williams, co-founder of Sierra-Online and designer of 18 adventure games

Omission of women game designers

Wizard and the Princess, 1980
King's Quest, 1984
OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS

(King’s Quest IV, 1988)  
(Phantasmagoria, 1995)

OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS

GAME HISTORY ETHNOCENTRISM

Game historians tend to omit platforms and games used outside of United States and Japan.

(Donovan, 2015: 9–10; Wolf, 2014: 158)

OMISSION OF PLATFORMS PLAYED OUTSIDE USA AND JAPAN

Commodore 64 (1982)  
ZX Spectrum (1982)

OMISSION OF GAMES MADE OUTSIDE USA AND JAPAN

British shoot ‘em up  
British absurd platform games

UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT BY STUDYING THE PAST

• Studying history is essential to understanding who, where, and what we are in the present
• Working at intersection of reflection and intervention

(Koopman, 2012)
SEXISM IN THE GAMING CULTURE

CONCLUSION

• History is often romanticized in a way that produce captivating but misleading tales
• The Foucauldian genealogical approach does not provide neat and tidy narrative structures, but better reflects the complexity and contingency of video game history, in addition to problematizing the way history is constructed

THANK YOU!

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