



Techno-industrial celebration, misinformation echo chambers, and the distortion cycle.

An Introduction to the History of Games International Conference proceedings

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What is the object of video game history? If we are to believe many of the journalistic accounts published in the last 20 years, the answer to that question appears to be painfully obvious. In his foreword to Roberto Dillon's *The Golden Age of Video Games* (2011), Atari co-founder Ted Dabney presents us with the following statement:

There is a lot of controversy over who invented the first 'video game' [...] Some say it was Ralph Baer while others say it was Nolan Bushnell. The truth is, it was Thomas Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray in 1947. The real question should be 'Who created the video game *industry*?' Nolan and I get the credit for that one (2011: ix).

Who would question such a self-assured statement, comforting us with ever more specific facts about techno-genius and providing us with an exciting narrative of nemesis rivalry, truth-deciphering and industrial grandeur? Journalists and aca-fans might have a hard time remembering that the techno-industrial glorification rhetoric is not as natural as some forefathers might have you believe. One shouldn't be surprised about the naturalization of that very specific 'object' – the great video game industry – as the major interest of

historical inquiry; most of the mainstream journalistic accounts of video game history have used hundreds of interviews with interested parties as their primary sources. As the publishers of these accounts know too well, the gaming community at large buys it, too. The willingness of many industry figures to help document the history of games has to be applauded, but we can't expect people who have an affective connection with their creations to do the critical examination of the myths built around them.

The first international conference on the history of games emerged out of the necessity to question video game historiography, to deconstruct this 'natural object' in order to start building with a heightened sense of self-awareness. As more scholars feel drawn to the discipline, the organizing committee (Espen Aarseth, Raiford Guins, Henry Lowood and Carl Therrien) thought the time was right to gather, lay out the many methodological issues and address the potential solutions. The conference was divided into three tracks, each with a keynote presenter and a dedicated round table on top of the regular panels: telling history, working with history, and building history. This short introduction will explore some of the issues associated with these practices. But first, we will introduce the basics of the three tracks and present the contributions that made their way into the proceedings.

'Telling history', the first track, sought to reflect on the way we create narratives out of the large amount of relevant data, and on museum exhibits that 'show and tell' the history of games. Stephen Kline's keynote address, revisiting the critical history proposed ten years earlier in *Digital Play*, provided ideal context for the contributions of the day. Christopher Lee Deleon's presentation invited us to make productive connections between the gameplay conventions of pinball machines and digital games. Mark J. P. Wolf took part in a discussion with Cindy Poremba and Andreas Lange about the affordances of encyclopedia, narratives and museum exhibitions when it comes to portraying the medium.

'Working with history', the second track, was meant to highlight the pitfalls and available tools involved in doing archeological research on older

games and relevant documents, and creating protocols for their proper preservation. After Melanie Swalwell presented some of the work being done in Australia to reanimate game culture,¹ the day proposed two panels: material evidence and cultural history; museums and preservation. Simon Dor's contribution on the RTS genre is based on the accessibility of the paratext to deliver a lexical analysis. Kristin MacDonough presented with great detail the process of bringing *Portal* to the MoMA, and Helen Stuckey reflected back on the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)'s exhibit celebrating Beam Software. Furthermore, Eric Kaltman provided an in-depth analysis of the *Civilization* franchise through a cautiously layered and fragmentary approach that could benefit how we study and exhibit games. A discussion among Jon Paul Dyson, Martin Picard and Raiford Guins showcased some of encouraging contemporary work being done on foreign corpuses, on the afterlife of video games, and the tremendous efforts done at the Strong Museum of Play to support game preservation.²

'Building history', on the last day of the conference, could be understood in two senses. First, it featured many veterans – Brenda Romero, John Romero and Warren Spector – who quite literally played a role in building the video game industry. Second, it brought on the stage many scholars whose task was to highlight the methodological issues and the cultural fascinations that dictate how any historian works and constructs history. As such, we had an opportunity to reflect back on the history of games studies with Espen Aarseth and Bernard Perron. We also witnessed history in the unmaking through the careful deconstruction of popular concepts such as “the casual revolution” and “gamification” (with Jonathan Lessard and Sébastien Genvo, respectively). Last but not least, Henry Lowood shared his insight on a cautious historiographical approach and gave us a comprehensive look at his work on preserving and understanding the role of game engines.

¹ For more information: <http://blogs.flinders.edu.au/play-it-again/>

² For more information: <http://www.icheg.org/about>

Conference participants had to provide an extensive 1000 words proposal, each reviewed by the members of the committee. In spite of this unusual requirement, the turnout surpassed expectations. The goal of these proceedings is to document part of what was presented at the conference. As such, the texts provided here have not undergone the usual double blind treatment of the journal; they have been reworked minimally through collaboration between the authors and the editors (Henry Lowood, Martin Picard and Carl Therrien).

In order to provide context to these contributions, we will now discuss two methodological issues that complicate the practices of working with, telling and building history: the cycle of distortion, and the echo chambers of misinformation.

The distortion cycle

There is a fascination in the community – and in the surrounding culture, undoubtedly – for the progressive conquest of the economy by the video game industry. How many times will we report that the new medium is finally surpassing, financially at the very least, cinema? The “medium of the 20th century” has been agonizing for so long that it is becoming hard to buy into the melodrama. Nonetheless, the new toys, as Stephen Kline, Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witford insist (2003), are the ideal commodity in the age of information capitalism. Recent concerns about aggressive data collecting technology and programmed obsolescence (Newman, 2012) certainly echo the observations put forth in *Digital Play*. But still, as historians of media, we are also fascinated by the progressive technical mastery and the phenomenal industrial expansion associated with video games, and this fascination dictates how we construct video game history to a large extent.

Even if the glorifying story of video games appears to build itself under our very eyes, stories are never just reported; storytellers build it more or less consciously. Many books and exhibits on the topic still use techno-industrial period markers: the ever convenient platform wars, where complex machinery is reduced to a meaningless bit-rating; the first major commercial success, the

crash, and arrival of major corporations. Our timelines are populated with first instances of major technological breakthroughs, platforms, studios, corporations, and with a few salient great-grandfather figures. Can a few good men really build a medium out of their bare hands? Is the romantic schema of a human life – with its periods of naive infancy, turbulent identity formation and golden age – really suited to understand the development of their “offspring”? Learning can greatly benefit from metaphors, and some media historians are even consciously promoting the biological allegory (see Gaudreault and Marion, 2013). But to many scholars in the field, women are not the only essential element missing in this “immaculate conception” story. As Paul Ricoeur has shown in his study of narrative from both fictional and historical sources (1983), storytelling is driven by the basic human need to project concordance on the discordant nature of the human experience of time. Still some narrative schemata – such as the strikingly teleological account of the medium’s technological evolution – are likely more distortive than others. Besides, the theory of great men has been debunked more than a century ago; the necessity of a more complex social history was one of the founding traits of *l’école des annales*.

Carefree construction comes with unacknowledged omissions. If our object is limited to the most striking games from a technological or industrial perspective, we are actively missing out on, arguably, the majority of game production, which is highly imitative in nature. Beyond any kind of value judgment, this derivative nature of video game production is a significant trait to study in itself. To give but one example, inspecting the clichéd heroes and game design of *Kid Chaos* (Magnetic Fields, 1994) and *Brian the Lion* (Reflections, 1994) on the comparatively unknown Amiga computer is a relevant way to better understand the chains of desire, forged by the popularity of the Sega and Nintendo mascots, and worn by designers and users of the home computer community in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. The problem with the techno-glorifying narrative that is so prevalent in the culture is that these games won’t be given any significant attention, will ‘naturally’ be

put at the bottom of the pile in terms of preservation priorities, and will likely become lost or completely invisible.

Contemporary fascinations inevitably dictate what should be discarded, and what should be preserved. Concurrently, available traces determine the history that can be told. Available traces are already partial; a partial historical inspection – now in the sense of biased – is just another *maillon* in an ongoing chain of exclusion. It is not difficult to understand how this distortion cycle naturally leads to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Misinformation echo chambers

One can only tell as much as one can work with. Thankfully, some preservation and documentation centers are already hard at work to provide better first hand accessibility to the artefacts. Since 1994 in France, publishers have to give physical copies of their games to complete the copyright process. In Montreal, the local WB Games, Eidos and Electronic Arts studios have started to give copies of their games to the national archives. Old timers like Taito and Nintendo are making efforts to salvage circuit boards and design documents.³ Dedicated video game museums, such as the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin and the ViGaMus in Rome, enjoy a wave of popularity feeding on the community's nostalgia. The Cabrinety collection at Stanford Libraries includes over 15 000 titles. At the Strong Museum of Play, the International Center for the History of Electronic Games currently holds over 50 000 video game artefacts. As we learned at the conference, Jon-Paul Dyson was able to help Brenda Romero when she stumbled upon Sirtech design documents for sale on Ebay. Romero's delivery of the anecdote – of a prized game designer finding her legacy dilapidated to the highest bidder – really made the absurd nature of the situation come forward, almost to comical effect. But comedy soon gave way to the painfully obvious: the video game industry, for the most part, has no memory.

³ For more information on the way different corporations handle preservation issues, see John Andersen's "Where Games Go To Sleep" three-part feature on *Gamasutra*.

Accessibility is going to get worse before it gets better. Many games and systems are already lost or unlikely to be found in a functional state. Games that were distributed on magnetic media (cassettes, floppy discs) are failing as this piece is being written, and the early generations of CD-ROM drives and discs are also quite fragile. While the ROM chips used in NES and Genesis cartridges are likely to last much longer, the availability of the console itself becomes problematic; many fail within 10 years of operation, and replacement parts will become harder to find as technology continues to evolve. Maybe hardware makers could be convinced to rebuild and redistribute hardware and software for historical purposes? One could observe that these corporations can “pass away” too. The sector is under tremendous stress. Company archives are not a big concern in a context where everybody is working overtime to get the game out. The industry needs extensions: more storage (infrastructures to store the artefacts), more processing power (individuals dedicated to the process of corporate memory), and more power (funds, in a context where many studios struggle to cut it even or make a profit). In the meantime, researchers working on the history of games will have a hard time finding company archives to conduct their studies.

At this point, digital preservation might appear as the obvious solution. Indeed, copies of CD and cartridge data are readily available, with high standards and procedures established by the underground preservation community.⁴ Many great emulators exist for a vast array of older systems. However, these tremendous contributions also bring new complications to the table. ROM digital copies cannot be transferred easily to the original support of the game and run on the original hardware. Most emulators do not reproduce the hardware processes of older consoles perfectly (for lack of programming time and / or efficiency). Distortion in the execution of the games on these virtual platforms occurs more frequently than the typical researcher can detect; how could it be noticed if the source was never played or played a long time

⁴ For instance, The Old School Emulation Center project (TOSEC) established a clear protocol to archive and name ROM sets; users constantly update lists about software released on more than 200 platforms. <http://www.tosecdev.org/>

ago? Since the whole arcade paradigm of video game design relied on split second timing and twitching abilities, these issues might not be as trivial as they sound. If enemies or projectiles start moving at even slightly different speeds, the gameplay experience might be altered significantly. Emulation provides an echo of an original experience that, granted, was rarely so monolithic to begin with. But as the echo replaces the source in order to give us access, some information is undoubtedly lost.

The massive digitization of culture feeds the illusion of perfect accessibility. After all, one would assume that surrogate access to a fragment of the experience is better than no access at all. How often, as historians, do we have to rely on the information found on Mobygames or the “Let’s plays” videos of a dedicated community? Is it normal, though, that *Mad Dog McCree* is undistinguishable from a first-person shooter in the Mobygames categories, even though one would be hard pressed to find a description of the shooting gallery genre as operating in “first-person” when the game was first released? Similarly, can *Super Mario Bros.* really be said to operate in third-person? Is it any wonder that *Quantum Gate* is said to include “fighting segments, done in FPS mode”⁵ if the source of the description is a non-interactive video on YouTube where the pre-rendered action sequence is indistinguishable from an actual shooting game? These honest mistakes – or at the very least uncritical associations – reverberate on a thousand websites, creating involuntary misinformation echo chambers. Even with the promise of a community watching over the legacy of the medium, it appears that updating the information is not always a simple task. One might wonder, for instance, why the Wikipedia entry for *Adventure* now states six references next to the original date. The best documented release date on the web fails to conceal, however,

⁵ Quoted from the main description on *Mobygames*, available at <http://www.mobygames.com/game/quantum-gate> (page visited on January 7th 2014).

that most of the sources cited on the page – even the academic ones – more than likely used Wikipedia in the first place to get the data.⁶

The accumulation of technology and the expansive nature of the industry necessitate so much attention that one is left to wonder what there is to say about the actual experience of playing games. How has play culture evolved over time? *Digital Play* and Tristan Donovan's *Replay* (2010) already have some answers for us that go beyond the contemporary fascination for casual vs. hardcore gamers. The socio-cultural exchange that occurs through the medium of video games, and the evolution of these exchanges, are rarely used as a structuring factor in history books. On top of preserving information about technology and industrial growth, we need to find ways to integrate the experience of game playing and its evolution in order to provide a more engaging portrait of the medium's history.

Notwithstanding Ted Dabney's confidence, at the end of this introduction, it appears that the real questions might not have been answered with such obfuscating clarity yet. We need to reflect on how we tell history, and how we work with history, in order to create more reflexive constructions. The information provided by industry figures remains, of course, an essential part of the equation. But in order to better understand the implicit assumptions we convene when we talk about our object, as well as partially reanimate those of the communities we study, we should also ask media historians, museums curators, entertainment critics, political economists, and players, to confront each other with what they think are "the real questions".

⁶ For more information on the *Adventure* dispute, visit this post on hardcoregaming101: <http://blog.hardcoregaming101.net/2012/07/adventure-game-released-in-year-of.html> (page visited on January 7th 2014).

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