



Introduction :
For a cultural history of video games

Jonathan Lessard, Martin Picard, Carl Therrien

In spite of preservation and accessibility issues, the history of video games has become a topic of interest for a growing community of scholars and museum curators around the world. In *Digital Play* (2003), Stephen Kline, Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford invited us to understand video games as a complex network of interactions between industrial structures, technological innovations and socio-cultural exchanges. In doing so, they also provided us with a useful tool to map out which areas have been explored more thoroughly, and which have been neglected.

Many historical accounts, from Kent's *Ultimate History* (2001) to Dillon's *Golden Age* (2011), document the key moments of the technological and industrial circuits. Built from hundreds of interviews with famous industry figures, and journalistic pieces that often echo the official marketing documents of major corporations, these accounts often feel like another voice in a choir of techno-industrial glorification. Video game historians working in academia have started to engage these two circuits more extensively: Greenwood's *The Video Game Explosion* (2008) and The Platform Studies series from MIT Press being just a few examples. The socio-cultural exchanges that occur through the medium of video games are also documented in these volumes. However, they are rarely used as a structuring factor in history books. Recently, more scholars are drawn to the principles of knowledge archaeology as laid out by Michel Foucault (1969). At its core, media archeology is an incentive to unearth and engage with the materiality of a phenomenon in a way that highlights its underlying tropes and ideologies. In doing so, the discipline is contributing to the expansion of our knowledge and critical appreciation of the cultural history of video games, and by extension of gaming activities.

This special *Kinephanos* issue on the cultural history of video games builds on the first edition of the Game History Annual Symposium, held in June 2014 in Montreal. We included two contributions from Keynote speakers invited for this occasion. Tristan Donovan revisits the context that led to his book *Replay* in order to underline the inherent limitations and constraints of such a project, and also to advise game historians on the challenges ahead. John Szczepaniak continues with similar considerations, focusing on the Japanese video game industry; he observes that it is now urgent to preserve artifacts on the verge of disappearing – most notably when it comes to early computer games – but also to collect accounts from developers before it is too late.

Regular contributions to this special issue benefited from a rigorous peer-review process: following their acceptance to present at the symposium, authors took into account the feedback received during the event as well as the evaluation from two expert reviewers in order to work on the final version of their paper.

In order to present the emergence of the French video game industry, Colin Sidre underlines the unsuspected significance of dedicated computer stores. Many hobbyists benefited from the possibility to meet and share a common interest in stores such as Illel, Sivéa and Ellix, which truly represented “contact surfaces” in the sense sociologist Fernand Braudel gave to this expression. Sidre builds on original documentary research (including dedicated game magazines, advertisements and interviews with store owners) in order to trace the mutations of many hobbyists and resellers into developers and publishers.

Jaakko Suominen, Markku Reunanen and Sami Remes propose an account of the retrogaming phenomenon based on a rigorous inspection of Finland’s specialized gaming press. They set out to defend a strong hypothesis: according to them, the discursive practice of magazines such as *Pelit*, *MikroBitti* or *Tietokonepelien vuosikirja* had a decisive influence on the development of retrogaming practices. They inspect the interactions between the journalistic community and the emergence of game nostalgia, emulation and preservation practices, and the contemporary monetization of the phenomenon. A thorough empirical

investigation allowed the authors to distinguish between three distinct phases in the evolution of retrogaming.

Alison Gazzard inspects a practice that still isn't thoroughly documented in video game history: the creation and sharing of game levels designed by game players, a rich and multifaceted phenomenon that emerged a long time before the release of the "ideal" object *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule 2008). Unearthing the *Repton* series developed for the BBC Micro, Gazzard argues that the level editor has been part of video game culture from the 1980s onwards. She also demonstrates that player communities didn't need the internet in order to create and share their hobby/creations.

Devin Monnens and Martin Goldberg's paper sets out to deconstruct the common conception that *Spacewar!*, the famous game developed at MIT by a group of hackers, benefited from a rapid distribution and graced every computer in North America during the 1960s. The authors reconstruct a slower process of dissemination, determined by the material and social realities of research labs: accessibility of the hardware, personnel mobility, etc. This contribution brings forward many novel elements in the history of *Spacewar!*, and underlines the disparity of perception between agents of this history and historians. Far from a breakthrough moment in the major cultural phenomenon we now call "video games", contemporaries of the game were more inclined to see the game as a gadget – an exciting one, for sure – that lacked the value of the serious research conducted on the computers where it emerged.

Finally, Thomas H. Rousse related the fascinating history of the "afterlife" – to use Raiford Guins' recent book title – of the *Warrior* arcade cabinet, one of the first combat games using a vector display. Rousse relates with great detail the "business intrigue" surrounding the mythical game, and considers the numerous preservation challenges of such intricate technology.