

Video Game Histories

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Video game studies is young enough that scholars interested in the medium's history have plenty of fresh terrain to cover. Much of the history written so far has been in a mode of fannish journalism, celebrating inventors and business innovators, charting firsts, and appreciating a canonical progression of platforms and games. (This has been called the "chronicle era" of video game history, and is not so different in approach from the histories of cinema written before academic film studies.) In the past few years more scholarly history has emerged, to be sure, and it reflects the varied interests of researchers and their backgrounds in literature, film, new media, and other fields.

I want to outline here a particular approach to video game history, which is the approach I am taking in my own research on early games in the home. I'm not prescribing this as the only or best way, but rather as one I think will be productive and help develop an academic practice of video game history that asks different questions and looks at different sources than chronicle-era histories. The approach I have in mind comes from the research tradition of cultural studies, particularly from studies of television but also film and other media.

A medium is a composite of many things: technologies, industrial strategies and routines, formal conventions, modes of address, social practices and institutions, and more generally ideas about culture and media's place in everyday life. It's not practical for any particular history to consider every dimension of a medium. But the cultural studies tradition offers models in which the historian of popular culture draws connections (or articulations, as they are sometimes called) between these elements, thinking of culture not merely as artifacts, but as social relations establishing a circuit of meaning.

Historical sources of the articulations along such a circuit are to be found in many sites:

- technologies and surrounding discourses (e.g., manuals) and the records of their inventors
- documents of companies
- the industry trade press, or the trade presses of related industries (e.g., for video games, publications like *Merchandising* and *Electronic News*)
- the popular press
- advertising
- documents of ordinary people and their everyday lives, such as photographs or social-scientific studies
- the primary media texts (e.g., games) and their surrounding promotional media (e.g., cartridge packaging)

One thing that a social and cultural history of early games in particular can help us understand is how the medium came into its identity. This identity should be understood to include not just the technologies of games (like computer chips, video displays, and controllers) but also the

protocols of their use, and ideas about the medium's cultural value, including ideas about the social class, age, and gender of video game players. The kinds of historical sources offered above can help us ascertain what kinds of protocols and values were developing and in place at a given time. They can point to prevailing notions of the kind of experiences afforded by games, the identities of players likely to have those experiences, and more generally the cultural status of the medium and its potential for being useful or meaningful. We can assume that the identity of video games didn't come out of nowhere, but was a product of existing patterns of social relations and the place of media and technology within those patterns. Historians of cinema and broadcasting at the time of their emergence and growing initial popularity have helped us understand the place of those media in society and culture, and appreciate ideas about their value and purpose. These ideas shift over time, but the continuities can be as informative as the ruptures. They can help us historicize the present as well as the past.

Video games are a particularly compelling medium of popular culture to study historically, as they feature intriguing similarities and differences when compared with other forms of popular culture. They were seen to promise a more participatory experience than the more "passive" older media, though at the same time were thought to have very powerful effects on users. And unlike film and broadcasting, they were typically experienced in more than one kind of social space - in public but also in private. The home games and the arcade games, similar as they may have been, were also distinct and in some ways in tension with one another. A social and cultural history of video games can build on the traditions of media history already established, but also has the potential for offering fresh ideas about the spaces of media and play in an increasingly technologically mediated world of leisure and amusement -- a world in which categories of public and private and passive and active are increasingly blurry, even untenable.