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"How Do We Play this Thing?": The State of Historical Research on Videogames

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Abstract: Though previously overlooked by academia, scholars from a wide array of fields now consider videogames as a serious subject of inquiry. The emergence of game studies as a standalone discipline has led to the publication of high-quality work on the medium, yet the field of videogame history is still immature. Initial attempts to introduce critical historical analysis of videogames in a field dominated by journalistic accounts were themselves plagued by an overemphasis on videogame canons and on the United States and Japan. In effect, early writings by videogame historians resembled "great man" theory, something one could qualify as "great game" theory. Over the last decade, this situation has started to be redressed and there are now growing efforts to produce solid historical scholarship on videogames. Still, game scholars and game historians need to collaborate, engage in conversation, and develop and adapt proper methods to conduct historical research on videogames in order to write relevant histories of this relatively young medium.

Keywords: videogame history, popular culture, videogames, game studies, interdisciplinarity

Videogames can have profound impacts on their players. Say a young a child saw a videogame console in a store's window. Drawn to it by the characters depicted on the console's box, we can then very well imagine the child asking their parents if they could have it and then receiving it for a special occasion, like the child's birthday. I was that child. When I was about four years old, I saw a Sega Genesis console bundled with *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*[1] in the window of a pawnshop, of all places. It was not my first interaction with videogames, but as far as I can remember, it was the first time I saw a Sega Genesis and it was Sonic and Tails, the *Sonic the Hedgehog* series' titular characters, who drew me to that videogame platform. This type of story is quite common among videogame enthusiasts.

Credit: From the author's personal collection.

Over 20 years later, I was contemplating doing a master's degree in public history but struggled to find a research topic. One day, while doing mindless work at the retail home renovation store I worked at, I remembered my father's advice: "Do something in life that you love, because if you

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[1] *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* (Sega 1992).

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don't, you will dread getting up in the morning." My passion for history was obvious, but I needed a topic I was deeply passionate about. Then it struck me: videogames. That realization put me on a collision course with a field of study I was wholly unaware of at the time: game studies.

The Study of Games in Academia

Games and play have been the subject of study in academia for quite some time. Most notably, historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*,[2] proved highly influential to scholars of play, such as Roger Caillois, and contemporary game scholars. Nevertheless, it would not be until the late-1990s and early-2000s that game studies would emerge as a standalone discipline. Game scholars come from very diverse backgrounds – e.g. computer science, sociology, design, film studies, communications, history – which contributes to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of this young discipline. A quick glance at the programs of game studies conferences, such as the Digital Games Research Association[3] and the Canadian Game Studies Association's[4] annual conferences, or at the authorship of collections on videogame theory, such as Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron's *The Videogame Theory Reader*[5] and *The Videogame Theory Reader 2*,[6] reveals an eclectic crop of topics and approaches to studying games. Game studies, and most significantly the study of videogames, has been steadily expanding in the last 20 to 30 years and some universities now have game studies programs or game scholars within their departments. But why do scholars deem this medium worthy of study?
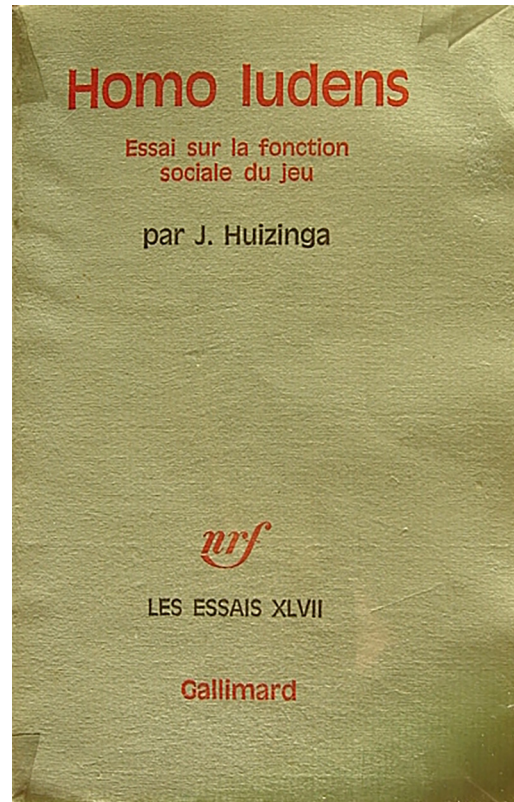

Credit: Photo taken by Heurtelions, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_Ludens#/media/File:Joan_Huizinga,_Homo_ludens_maitrier.jpgCC BY-SA 4.0.

Until recently, the harshest critics of videogames portrayed them, at best, as child's play or a second rate medium devoid of merit and, at worst, as causing players to become violent. Thankfully, the penetration of videogames in the mainstream and the increased amount of research on the medium challenged these assumptions.[7] Game scholars have shown how this rich and complex medium falls at the intersection of technology, entertainment, art, and culture and how it borrowed and build on media that came before it – whether it be film, literature, or other games. Additionally, according to some sources, videogames have even surpassed film and sports in terms of profit, and this trend is said to have intensified with the COVID-19 global pandemic.[8] This

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2 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of The Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

3 "Past Conferences," Digital Games Research Association, accessed March 29, 2021, http://www.digra.org/conference/past-conferences/. Please note that not every program is available on DiGRA's website.

4 The last two CGSA/ACÉV conference programs are a good sample of the type work being done within that association. See "CGSA 2018 draft schedule," Canadian Game Studies Association, accessed March 29, 2021, http://tinyurl.com/cgsa2018 and "The Canadian Game Studies Association/l'Association canadienne d'études vidéoludiques 2019 annual conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver," Canadian Game Studies Association, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.congress2019.ca/sites/default/files/association/2019/05/299-cgsa-acev-2019-05-27-draft.pdf.

5 Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

6 Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

7 See Helen Thornham, *Ethnographies of the Videogame: Gender, Narrative and Praxis* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6–7 and James Newman, *Playing with Video games* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–13.

8 Jordan Williams, "Video game industry bigger than sports, movies combined: report," The Hill, December 23, 2020, accessed March 29, 2021, https://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/in-the-know/531479-video-game-industry-bigger-than-sports-movies-combined-report?rl=1 and Meghan L. Dennis, "Archaeogaming, ethics, and participatory standards," *The SAA Archaeological Record* 16 no. 5 (2016): 29–33.

figure is up for debate and requires more investigation, but it is undeniable that videogames are now a significant and relevant medium.

History *of* Videogames

There is some debate as to the exact beginning of videogame history, but the argument could be made that it was *Spacewar!*[9] – with its first version being completed in 1961, and which was finalized in spring 1962 – that launched videogames as a medium.[10] Still, the study of the history of videogames is in its infancy. Much of the early work to preserve this medium's history was done by hobbyist communities who "have been the trailblazers of game heritage preservation and only more recently have various institutional heritage stakeholders, like national libraries, various game preservation initiatives, run by collectors as well as established museums, gotten involved."[11] Fans even created online databases documenting videogames, such as Moby Games[12] and Giant Bomb,[13] which once seemed "nonacademic or lacking in seriousness"[14] but are now regarded as valuable primary sources.[15] Yet, this initial lack of interest in videogames by scholars, and in particular professional historians, also impacted the writing of videogame history.

Credit: Spacewar! running on the Computer History Museum's PDP-1. Joi Ito from Inbamura, Japan - Spacewar running on PDP-1, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacewar!#/media/File:Spacewar!-PDP-1-20070512.jpgCC BY 2.0.

In 2009, Jeffrey Yost argued that there was still little critical historical analysis of videogames and "much of the existing literature [was] blindly celebratory, or merely descriptive rather than scholarly and analytical."[16] Henry Lowood, curator of the History of Science and Technology Collections and of the Film & Media Collections at the Stanford University Libraries, made similar remarks, stating that the intersection of games studies and history is unfortunately very underdeveloped and that:

> Thus far, what passes for the history of digital games in game studies has been a very immature idea. It's been dominated by journalistic accounts, which is not in itself a bad thing, but the weight has been very much on either the chronicling of events or on storytelling. I think the discipline of history should bring to that an interpretive edge, including of course a critical perspective. If you look at somebody like Hayden White, who's written on historiography, it is perfectly legitimate and expected for historians to write in almost a 'fictional' sense, to construct their stories to express a particular point. I think there's been almost none of that in game studies so far.[17]

Lowood is correct in calling for better practices concerning historical analysis of videogames, but game historians must not forget they also have blind spots.

Early efforts to investigate, preserve, and exhibit videogame history involving game historians suffered from an overfocus on the United States and Japan, two of the largest videogame producers worldwide, and on the most successful videogaming platforms and titles. Much like was

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9 *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, Martin Graetz, Wayne Wiitanen, Bob Saunders, Steve Piner 1962).

10 For a discussion on the early history of videogames, see Tristan Donovan, "Hey! Let's Play Games!," in *Replay: The History of Video Games* (East Sussex: Yellow Ant, 2010), 3–13.
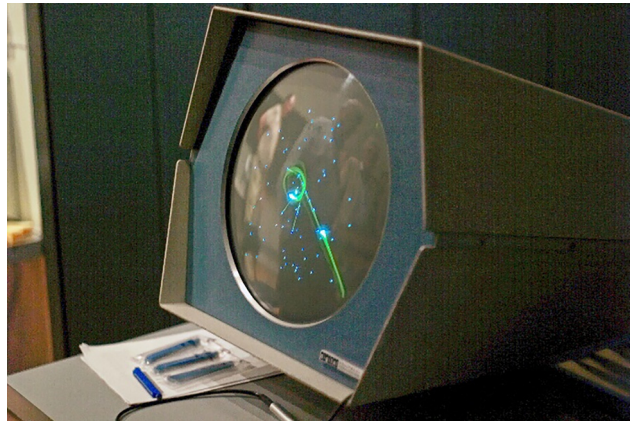
11 Niklas Nylund, Patrick Prax, and Olli Sotamaa, "Rethinking game heritage–towards reflexivity in game preservation," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 3 (2021): 268–80, quote on 273. See also Melanie Swalwell, "Moving on from the Original Experience: Philosophies of preservation and dis/play in game history," in *Fans and Videogames: Histories, Fandom, Archives,* eds. Melanie Swalwell, Helen Stuckey, and Angela Ndalianis (New York: Routledge, 2017), 213–33 and Jaakko Suominen, "Game Reviews as Tools in the Construction of Game Historical Awareness in Finland, 1984–2010: Case 'MikroBitti' Magazine," in *Think Design Play: Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference* (Hilversum: Utrecht School of the Arts, 2011). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/11310.15375.pdf.

12 "Video Games Database. Credits, Trivia, Reviews, Box Covers, Screenshots – Moby Games," Moby Games, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.mobygames.com/.

13 "Giant Bomb - Video Game Reviews, Videos, Forums and Wiki," Giant Bomb, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.giantbomb.com/.

14 Raiford Guins, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 25.

15 James A. Hodges, "How do I hold this thing? Controlling reconstructed Q*berts," *new media & society* 19, no. 10 (2017): 1581–98, quote on 1585.

16 Jeffrey R. Yost, "From the Editor's Desk," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 31, no. 3 (2009): 2. doi: 10.1109/MAHC.2009.9.

17 David S. Heineman, *Thinking about Video Games: Interviews with the Experts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 71.

the case with "great man" theory – the historiographical practice of prioritizing leaders (typically coded as cis-gendered, straight, white men) – which used to plague the discipline of history, early videogame historians focused on firsts and on influential and commercially successful titles. For instance, at "the 2007 Game developer's conference (GDC), a panel of five speakers from industry and academia proposed a Digital Game Canon, consisting of 10 games of historical and cultural significance 'that everyone should play'."[18] However, all of these games were hits and only one of them – *Tetris*[19] – was not from the United States, the United Kingdom, or Japan.[20] In essence, this means that, until recently, much of what has been written on videogame history could amount to a translation of "great man" theory to the medium, or what I call "great game" theory. While this situation could cause consternation from historians and game scholars alike, it presents an opportunity for videogame historians to address this lack of quality literature on videogame history, and some have already started doing so.

The last decades have seen several promising developments in the field. The Game Histories book series has seen the publication of several monographs of the highest quality. Notably, the series includes Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins' marvelous collection *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon*,[21] which attempts to jump-start a "critical historical study of games" by establishing basic terminology for the field.[22] Moreover, the History of Games conference held its first edition, entitled "Transnational game histories,"[23] in October 2020. This global initiative "seeks to act as a catalyst for academic research on gaming history" and "brings together scholars, curators and enthusiasts in order to disseminate research/preservation initiatives and develop networks."[24] Heritage institutions around the world – such as The Strong National Museum of Play, the Computerspielemuseum, and the Finnish Museum of Games – have also started to preserve and exhibit videogames. The vast amounts of material in their collections, from platforms and games themselves to videogame ephemera, permits scholars to study the history of the medium much more readily than was previously possible.

The "great game" theory approach has also started to be addressed by numerous scholars. Notably, Jaroslav Švelch's *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*[25] steps out of the canon of the United States and Japan as the centers for game production and explores a local scene. It is an insightful micro history of Czech amateur programmers from the 1980s who used games as both a means of self-expression and entertainment. Others, such as Carl Therrien, explore lesser known videogame platforms. In his most recent monograph, *The Media Snatcher: PC/CORE/TURBO/ENGINE/GRAFX/16/CDROM2/SUPER/DUO/ARCADE/RX*,[26] Therrien investigates the PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 and reflects on how the cultural history of videogames is constructed. Finally, Anne Ladyem McDivitt's *Hot Tubs and Pac-Man: Gender and the Early Video Game Industry in the United States (1950s–1980s)*[27] explores the gendered nature of the videogaming industry in America. Her work is particularly relevant as the intersection of identity and videogames is a highly controversial topic. This has been emphasized by Gamergate – a coordinated online harassment campaign against those who called out sexism within videogame culture – and growing calls to address the videogame industry's lack of representation as it relates to women and many other marginalized groups.

History *in* Videogames

While the history of videogames requires more attention by scholars, there is also an entire subgenre of videogames that is of particular interest to historians and public historians especially – historical videogames. The study of history *in* games, dubbed historical game studies,[28] has

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18 Melanie Swalwell, "Towards the preservation of local computer game software: Challenges, strategies, reflections," *Convergence* 15, no. 3 (2009): 263–79, quote on 263.

19 *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov 1984).

20 Swalwell, "Towards the preservation of local computer game software," 264.

21 Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins, *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

22 Ibid., xiv–xv.

23 "Transnational game histories: program," History of Games, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.history-of-games.com/programme-2020-temp/.

24 "Organization," History of Games, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.history-of-games.com/steering-commitee/.

25 Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

26 Carl Therrien, *The Media Snatcher: PC/CORE/TURBO/ENGINE/GRAFX/16/CDROM2/SUPER/DUO/ARCADE/RX* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

27 Anne Ladyem McDivitt, Hot Tubs and Pac-Man: Gender and the Early Video Game Industry *in the United States (1950s–1980s)* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020).

28 See Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: what is historical game studies?," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017): 358–71. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638.

received some attention by historians such as Jerome De Groot[29] and Adam Chapman.[30] More recently, Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmerman published a marvelous edited collection entitled *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*,[31] which explores the question of authenticity in historical videogames. There have also been some interesting initiatives outside of traditional scholarly publishing. *History Respawned*, for instance, "a

Credit: https://www.historyrespawned.com/ Permission to use granted by owner.

video and podcast series where historians consider historical video games (i.e. *The Oregon Trail*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Civilization*, etc.),"[32] tackles this topic aptly. Bob Whitaker, creator of the podcast, and John Harney, its associate editor, are history professors who investigate the use of history in games by interviewing experts or people in the industry and by commenting on their experiences playing historical videogames. *Play the Past* is

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also a solid example of scholars tackling this subject online. This collaboratively edited and authored website, where a significant number of its authors are historians,[33]

is "dedicated to thoughtfully exploring and discussing the intersection of cultural heritage (very broadly defined) and games/meaningful play (equally broadly defined)"[34] and welcomes contributions by those "interested in games and the past."[35] These alternative means of publishing scholarship are nothing new to public historians and have the potential to help scholars share their research much more widely and to stimulate greater interest in the topic. Scholarship on the intersection of history and videogames and on the history of videogames are steadily expanding, and it is only natural that *International Public History* would contribute to this growing literature.

"Engage in Jolly Co-operation!"[36]

Videogames have become an integral part of contemporary life in many parts of the world and they can have deep impacts on players' lives. Their rich and complex history is under-researched and the bulk of what has been published to date suffers from significant flaws. Nevertheless, with the growing interest of academics who have acknowledged the worth of this medium, it has become even clearer that historians and public historians have much to bring to game studies and to gain by collaborating with game scholars. This special issue attempts to build stronger relationships between the two disciplines. Just like game studies, the authorship of this issue comes from diverse scholarly backgrounds and from countries across the globe, including Canada, the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Indonesia.

The first part of this issue is dedicated to videogames in museums. It opens with a contribution by Jon-Paul Dyson titled "Building a Video Game Collection: Lessons Learned from The Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games," which examines the genesis of the play mission of the Strong National Museum of Play, its various videogame initiatives, and explores some of the challenges museums and other institutions can face when working with videogames.

Then, Haryo Pambuko Jiwandono and Edeliya Relanika Purwandi, in "Playful Curation: A Case Study of Doki-Doki Station Museum's Role in Preserving Digital Game

29 See Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

30 See Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Video Games Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

31 Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann, *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020).

32 "About," History Respawned, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.historyrespawned.com/about.

33 "Authors," Play the Past, accessed March 29, 2021, http://www.playthepast.org/?page_id=28.

34 "About," Play the Past, accessed March 29, 2021, http://www.playthepast.org/?page_id=2.

35 "Contact," Play the Past, accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.playthepast.org/?page_id=30.

36 Quote from *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011).

History in Indonesia," explore game preservation within the Indonesian context. The authors address the lack of documentation on videogame preservation in the global south and argue that digital games are localized formative elements of culture. By studying Doki-Doki Station Museum, Jiwandono and Purwandi show how this establishment contributes to the formation of a local Indonesian gaming culture within a global context.

In "Towards a Foucauldian Genealogy of Video Game (Pre)history," Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin proposes a Foucauldian genealogical approach to videogame history as an alternative to the oft romanticized and captivating but misleading tales that pass as videogame history. This narrative-skeptical approach challenges early practices in videogaming history as these have been unable to appropriately reflect upon the complex and messy history of the medium.

Through an analysis of *Wolfenstein: The New Order,*[37] Eugen Pfister and Felix Zimmermann ask if specific media or media forms are fundamentally suitable for dealing responsibly with difficult knowledge. In "'No one is ever ready for something like this.' – On the Dialectic of the Holocaust in First-Person Shooters as Exemplified by *Wolfenstein: The New Order*," the authors explore how videogames fit in the discussion of how various forms of media engage with the memory of Nazi atrocities.

The issue's final article, "Reprogramming the History of Video Games: A Historian's Approach to Video Games and their History," by Jeffrey Lawler and Sean Smith, proposes that all videogames are historical sources and that they are infused with explicit and implicit historical meaning. As historical disciplines have been slow to respond and engage with the medium of videogames, the authors call upon historians to join the discussion on videogame history as it is an essential part of media and cultural history.

Every author brings specific perspectives and expertise to the table, but all share a common interest in history and videogames. Their willingness to cross disciplinary lines and to engage in collaborative efforts contributes to the growing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship necessary to study videogame history effectively. Videogames have made and portrayed history. They're role in shaping public history is becoming increasingly evident as a result. They deserve to be studied rigorously and critically.

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37 *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames 2014).