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A future for game histories?

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Abstract: Recent years have seen an efflorescence of writing and curatorial work focused upon the past of video games. However, this work has tended to concentrate on particular forms of analysis, and privileged certain kinds of discourse. This article argues that these approaches limit our capacity to produce effective histories of and around games, and proposes more nuanced histories, informed by Foucauldian ideas of a genealogical approach to historical work, and a clear sense of the voices that present histories fail to represent. Broader, cultural game histories, we contend, offer us a clearer understanding of games' past, and can move us away from the teleological, deterministic, and "great man" histories which dominate the present landscape. Reflecting on the past in this way also suggests an agenda for the future, in encouraging us to consider how and to what end we preserve video game culture.

1. Through the looking glass

The recent deepening of interest in the histories of videogames appears as a welcome diversification to the study of videogames. Rightly there is a great deal of excitement and interest in this subdivision of Games Studies, not least in the bristling technologies enabled by Moore's Law, which permit a glance into the past through a digital looking glass. Just as crucially, these are framed as living histories, where those on the digital frontier from early players and hobbyists through to journalists, developers and publishers provide cogent commentary on the historical state of the art. As Carl Therrien observes

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The video game histories that we encounter, across a variety of media forms, offer us a very narrow view of the past. While people who had a leading role in making games are often interviewed for documentaries and news articles, and many books have been written about US and Japanese games culture, researchers have paid very little attention to other regions and to other people for whom games were important. Our article argues that researchers exploring games history need to think more carefully about what that history should encompass, and consider how games are situated within cultures, locally, nationally and globally. We should talk to those who played games and those who worked with games—in sales, for example, or in arcades—alongside those who made the games which we remember fondly. These approaches will produce better, more interesting, and more representative histories of and around games.

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> The greatest advantage of video game historians, after all, resides in this simple fact … [they] still have access to early players. Only a closer inspection of the players through interviews and field studies will lead the way to a proper conceptualisation of the medium's history. (Therrien, 2012, p. 26)

Although there remain problems with utilising living histories in this manner, Therrien's central thesis of integrating theoretical and methodological approaches from established disciplines, alongside archival and primary research is compelling and evidenced in emergent work on videogame histories from around the world. Guins (2014), builds on his previous work of the spatial position of arcade games (Guins, 2004) to construct an archaeology of videogames which rakes through the dust of deserts, drawers and detritus in search of an "afterlife" of videogames. Whilst he impels the academy to engage in the study of games, he is clear that it is necessary to draw on a broad and deep record of the time including "photographs, audio recordings, surviving games, oral histories, memoirs, fictional accounts, popular and trade publications, marketing materials, films of the era" (Guins, 2014, p. 83), articulated partly as a response to the lack of sustained academic engagement. The result is that the "inhalation of dust and the need to wipe away the grime from your brow go hand in hand with researching game history" (Guins, 2014, p. 27). Texts as diverse as the descriptive philosophy of Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983) and Amis's hired-gun hyperbolic *Invasion of the Space Invaders* (1982) complement the raid of the lost ark of the Alamogordo desert landfill where thousands of Atari games were found to have been dumped, predicating and then symbolising, the infamous 1983 videogame crash.

With archaeology at work across the globe, videogame histories are becoming more diverse and less centred on the traditional geographical hubs of the US, Japan and, to a lesser extent, the UK and diversifying to include practices such as DIY hobbyists in Australia and New Zealand (Swalwell, 2008), hobbyist media production behind the iron curtain in the 1980s (see e.g. Svelch, 2013; Wasiak, 2013) and the demo scene in Scandinavia (Mayra, 2015). Many of these studies are unified under a wider movement towards "local games histories". This critical and cultural position consciously rebuffs US-Japanese centrism (which itself appears as the written manifestation of the closed platform models of console gaming from Atari and Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft) and privileges "hidden", or previously unwritten videogame histories, attained through recourse to archival material and primary data of the time and about the time. This reinforces the richness of opportunity provided by close temporal proximity to the object of research, but within a completely altered paradigm where the past is a litany of foreign countries which in some cases no longer exist, their very calcification making their register even more exotic: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Indeed, James Newman, in *Best Before*, asks why "few timelines or histories account for Soviet-era games" (Newman, 2012, p. 41). This is useful as it locates the past spatially, i.e. within the USSR, and therefore temporally: within the short period until 1991 when the USSR had access to information and communication technologies, and pertinently, those on which it was possible to play games. Yet even in a time as recent as this, the hidden histories of videogames carry their own suicide chips. With customary scholarship, Newman examines how games technologies less than 30 years old are threatened by challenges as diverse as bit rot, sunshine, planned obsolescence and emulation. These threats inadvertently generate a recoding—twice over—of their legacy. First, in that the program code is altered by exposure to environmental or human intervention and second, in the confounding rush towards the "logic of upgrade", where if an emulated incarnation of *Donkey Kong* doesn't play, sound or looks like the original, "to what extent is it an appropriate archival and display resource?" (Newman, 2012, p. 37). The question posed is whether this is a retrofitting of culture, or a re-writing of history. If it is either or neither of these, it is certainly enough to ensure the observation that videogame histories are "oriented around a fairly uncontested chronology … that is not just a movement through time, not just progression, but rather a sense of 'progress' towards better, faster technology, if not better games" (Newman, 2012, pp. 41–42). The rush towards the future is a peril to the past. If this, as Newman contends, means that videogames *are* disappearing then they

reappear in spanking new technologies as the spectre at the feast, immediately familiar but markedly different. Indeed, it is nostalgia which ensures that the melancholic utterance "this isn't the same as I remember it" is grammatically and technically correct: alterations and emulations mean that the game becomes like *Pac-Man*'s "split screen": not the same game at, on, or as any level.

If the game has changed, then so have the rules and processes. With the rise of local game histories it becomes at once more difficult to justify a totalising approach, but also more difficult to move beyond it. Broad and deep though Guins' *Game After* is, there remains a tacit, almost resigned acknowledgement that it necessarily, by dint of its topic, requires a cyclopean focus on US videogame histories. Similarly, *Best Before* almost bemoans the paraphernalia offered in preserving the past, with accordant research drowning in a silicon sea. In common with Therrien, many of the commentaries suggest approaches to wider questions of the cultural histories of videogames, but few deliver on them in their exposition and fewer still possess a theoretical rationale. While for reasons of position, focus and clarity of argument, there are practical reasons for this, much of what is emergent in local game histories comes as a reaction to this position: a regional rejoinder to the global narratives offered by the commercial–cultural hegemony of the US–Japan alpha and omega of game histories. Additionally, scholarship that would once have taken months to undertake is simplified through researchers' access to technologies that were unheard of, and even unthought of 30 years ago: there is now no excuse for overlooking the back issues of *Zzap! 64* or *Electronic Gaming Monthly* which are archived online and offer rich source material for cultural and discourse analysis. Access to publications that would once have required the diligence of a collector allied with the eye of an archivist can now be retrieved with the swish of a finger. Walkthroughs, *Retro Gamer*, adaptations, speedruns, museums, retro arcades, candy cabs, remasters. It is not that the past is a calcified foreign country that cannot be uncovered, but instead it is the future which covers the past with a blanket of technology, avenues of investigation bristling with potential.

2. Gaming culture?

It seems then as if the desire for a less linear-chronological history of videogames rubs against the possibilities of technology. There is a concomitant, at times collective call, for scholars of videogames history to employ an archaeological or genealogical methodology, one which is "gray, meticulous and patiently documentary. It operates on field of entangled parchments, on documents that have been scratched over many times" (Foucault, 1977, p. 139). In distinction to linear-chronology, which offers a trim account of cause and effect, closely tied to the logic of the upgrade, a genealogical methodology proffers a broad and deep account of the *histories* and not only the *time* of videogame development. From the floorwalkers of a Southend-on-Sea arcade, arcing the coin-slots on *Moon Cresta* machine (Wade, 2016, p. 96), to a Polish hacker distributing warez throughout the eastern bloc in cahoots with the Polish Olympic team (Czajkowski, 2009), it gives voice to those who are often overlooked in linear-chronologies. Indeed, in promoting the "me-first" mode of commentary which privileges who did what and when, the why can be omitted. This has a proclivity to weaken the value inherent in the everyday, elides the possibility for analysis (see Lefebvre, 2004) and—most vitally for games studies—conceals the potential differences and deviances from the practices and cultures neatly listed in linear-chronology accounts, leaving behind a rich seam of under-researched and under-represented genealogy, which, as we move away from living histories become increasingly likely to be forgotten. Genealogy then is a methodology which speaks to some of the contemporary approaches to the study of videogames histories, yet still the future continues to overlay the past. PDF scans of magazines lack the complexity or entanglement articulated by Foucault, but in practical terms remain smooth and easy to navigate. This is brought into sharp relief by Therrien (writing with Martin Picard (2015)), when using the North American magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* to found a discourse analysis of the rise of the "format wars" in the United States and Canada. Leaving aside the US-centrism, perhaps forgivable given that Therrien and Picard hail from Canada, it remains incumbent on the reader to note that the

> newfound accessibility of material traces (magazines, printed ads, manuals and flyers) …
> allow[s] us to reflect on platform design beyond the obvious hardware specifications and
> consider the discursive crafting of the experience. (Therrien & Picard, 2015, p. 3)

Whilst the authors' ultimate thesis is valiant as regards moving beyond the linear-chronology of the biological and techno-warfare rhetoric that is handed down generation upon generation by journalists, platform manufacturers and some histories of record (e.g. Donovan, 2010; Kent, 2001 and Wikipedia), the methodology employed to reach this point appears to abandon Therrien's earlier plea for a deeper, broader ethnographic engagement with the living histories of the players, makers and custodians of games. Therrien and Picard do not even attempt to disguise this: they justify the use of these material traces by their ease of access. This does not mean that these have been uncovered by the authors, familiar with the dust and grime of Guins's gaming history, but have been collected, collated, curated, scanned, uploaded, preserved and displayed by individuals dedicated to the cause of preservation of early games culture. In the case of UK games magazine *Zzap64!*, Ian Black, the curator of the "Def Guide to *Zzap64!*", travelled to Ludlow, Shropshire in 2001 to capture a visual record of its spiritual home (Black, 2001), a pilgrimage some members of the academy are less willing to undertake with each passing year. Even if, as Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 2012, 2013, 2015) asserts, there was a genuine and vital "break" in the 1980s lexicon used by videogame magazines (particularly in the UK) which demands special attention through discourse analysis, this was not a journalistic or cultural endeavour undertaken in a vacuum, as some kind of "automatic writing" scripted onto an inert history of record, but by humans, who, as Therrien himself has so adroitly identified, remain a living history to be interviewed and interrogated. Magazines and flyers, adverts and manuals require similar interrogation, but to rely solely on such material, and within a medium as dynamic and nebulous as games, is difficult to justify—and even harder to abate—when a living and breathing past is within touching distance.

The increasingly popular methodology employed by Therrien originated with the sociologist Graham Kirkpatrick's investigation into the development of a specialist lexicon around videogames. His central argument turns on the axis that UK magazines such as *Computer and Video Games*, *Zzap! 64* and *Crash* would employ inventive use of language in editorial and adverts, with the result being that the revised lexicon was both a contributor to a "gaming culture" and evidence of the formation of a new "field" (Bourdieu, 2010). This is enabled through the heuristic learning generated by a *habitus* which confers "an educational function on toys which . . . rises with the transmission of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 221). This is particularly evident in the purchasing of microcomputers by parents who insisted that their use would "help with homework" and which were then sited in bedrooms, living rooms and dining rooms of middle class households. It was reinforced through the BBC employing Reithan values in its response to the threat and opportunity presented by microprocessor technology (Gazzard, 2016) through the Computer Literacy Project. This initiative introduced BBC Micros to secondary schools and complemented them with a series of TV shows where individuals, usually the same young people who coded in their bedrooms, could demonstrate their hacking prowess to the nation, a valuable contributor to the contemporary position of the UK videogames industry (Anderson & Levene, 2012).

Kirkpatrick's exploration of the emergence of this new field appears to press all the right buttons. Running gaming in parallel with the changes wrought by the socially and economically rambunctious 1980s, he ranges against the contemporary US-centrism in games studies and identifies the latent and overt sexism and elitism in the magazines when gaming eventually goes mainstream and "casual" in the mid-1990s. In terms of the education generated by a new field, Kirkpatrick notes that as the gaming *habitus* develops, the mode of address changes from didactic, paternalistic learning to something closer to a symposium or a conversation, thereby moving "from a mode of address in which parents are supervising and gamers are their children, to one in which young people are their sole intended audience" (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 87). The placing of the audience into a position of cultural knowledge, of *savoir*, speaks to a maturing medium which has generated its own *habitus* and has developed an identity separate to trainspotters and board game players (Kirkpatrick, 2013,

p. 87). From the soft paternalism of the BBC Micro to the rebellion of its teenage years with the Sega Mega Drive, the coming-of-age story told by videogames is enshrined in the discourse which surrounds it. Somewhere following its mirror stage and in its growing pains, Kirkpatrick argues, the *habitus* and culture of this new field becomes transfixed, so that gaming becomes defined by "a failure, an internal limitation that prevents it … from becoming a fully autonomous cultural practice" (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 94).

The moral panics, sexism, elitism and bad behaviour which infect the contemporary gaming *habitus* suggest that Kirkpatrick may well be correct in that it is a stymied cultural practice whose technical proficiency is not matched by the maturity of its savants. Yet, despite drawing on Bourdieu's framework, Kirkpatrick skims the influence of formal and informal education in the formation of the field, particularly around heuristic learning, which provides—primarily young—people with the building blocks of new concepts to enable ludic invention. Historically, studies of children and videogames (e.g. Greenfield, 1984; Loftus & Loftus, 1983; see also Hirschfield, 1981) have shown the learning that takes place to be emergent, so that invention and innovation are key ways of adapting to the changing dynamics of gameplay. This occurs at the abstract level, as seen in the inputting of POKE codes and mapping of levels for distribution in gaming magazines of the 1980s, and at the applied level, in developing techniques such as lurking in *Asteroids* (1979) or hunting warp zones in *The New Zealand Story* (1988). The emergence and use of building blocks is also a key characteristic in the study of videogames. The fact that videogames have developed their own discourse, language and culture of study around them clearly indicates a maturing medium, particularly as the ludological school maintain that videogames be treated separately to other art forms and media (Aarseth, 2001). Meanwhile, in the contemporary gaming field, a significant proportion of games development is taking place in the service of education. Serious games, educational games and simulations are seen as viable experiential alternatives to traditional didactic models, transplanting the experimentation with code and hardware so popular in the 1980s to the modern classroom and lecture hall. Whilst the BBC micro:bit represents something of the marketisation of public broadcasting—and learning—in its appeal to coding education in the classroom, it reminds us of the BBC's Rethian values which inspired the BBC Micro 30 years before. The immaturity that Kirkpatrick sees as a failure is what marks videogames as different to other fields, while its accent on toying and experimentation means that while its primary appeal lies with children and young people, it can, with the investment of time, be accessible to all.

The lack of wider context in Kirkpatrick's analysis can be explained and perhaps even rationalised by the focus on the discourse analysis of gaming magazines from the 1980s, which are an important—if narrow—part of the formation of gaming culture and should, as argued below, always be viewed as part of a wider suite of authentic voices including those who played, made, produced, published, distributed and sold games in these formative years of gaming culture. However, there are clear flaws in Kirkpatrick's methodology, which, whilst helpful in moving away from an overt reliance on technological determinism, still reverts to the linear-chronology of "firsts". This is often at the expense of the acknowledgement of the human element, the *technical knowledge* or *connaissance* commanded by game developers, but can omit the patience and meticulousness that Foucault sees as vital to the genealogical approach. For instance, *Uridium* (1986), programmed by Andrew Braybook and published by Hewson Consultants, is identified as responsible for a major cultural shift in the lexicon around videogames. This was due to the use of the term "arcade" in the advertising of the game in *Crash* which was "clearly intended to convey the idea that something of the arcade experience was making its way into games played on the Spectrum machine" (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 61), crucial as the Sinclair Spectrum 48 K was widely perceived as too underpowered to run the game. Yet, the term "arcade" was originally used by Andrew Braybook to describe *Paradroid*, the precursor to *Uridium* when the title was in pre-production for the Commodore 64, "It's not really an arcade adventure—it leans more towards arcade" (Braybook, 1986). The apportionment of a significant cultural turn to a term used in a magazine advertisement is problematic for several reasons. First, as outlined above, it minimises the importance of the techniques of the programmer, the networks and cultural and educational capital required in the formation of a new field. Second,

it obviates the critical term "arcade" which is highly contested, socially, legally and ethically (see especially Trapunski, 1979, p. 104) as well as ludologically given that arcade videogames in the 1980s were often evolutions of previous non-digital games such as pinball, bagatelle and tennis (DeLeon, 2014). Third, and most vitally, it is outright evidence that the seductive sheen proffered by contemporary technologies weighs heavily on the past. It seems ironic that in Kirkpatrick's research, and to a lesser extent, Therrien's and Picard's, access to a broader spectrum of information not only results in a narrow, incomplete engagement with games, the cultural practices involved and their historical position, but an incorrect, and on occasion, a misleading one.

3. Gaming history?

Weaknesses and flaws aside, though, these endeavours demonstrate a more or less explicit understanding that our existing game histories are flawed. Newman's note on the teleological nature of the majority of the work that has been done, Therrien's sense that there is a great (and broadly untapped) source base in the availability of early players, and Kirkpatrick's attempts to construct a historic game culture can all be seen as responses to a prevalence of historical writing which is deterministic, technologically orientated and totalising. By highlighting these lacunae, newer work not only points to the incompleteness of existing histories but sets the stage to critique the methodological weaknesses of these approaches to the past as well. Of particular concern in this respect is the dominance of a small number of voices who have come to inhabit this historical space and who have, through repeated attention via interviews and engagement, been cast as avatars of particular historical moments: renowned game developers, journalists, collectors; the "great men"—for these are rarely women—of games past. Thus, in large regard, the present of games history as a discipline is a moment from the historiographic past; an almost Whiggish, nineteenth century-style account of progress towards greatness, of inexorable improvement, told through the actions of powerful agents who shaped the future. This approach is reinforced through the application of oral history techniques, which while intensively refined in historical work in recent decades in order to give voice to the previously voiceless, are applied here instead to reinforce the attention paid to the great men. The value, then, in work like Kirkpatrick's is that reading all of the magazine rather than simply the narrative discourse of its writers allows him a broader focus, beyond the written record which encodes the central position of the very same luminaries interviewed for contemporary retrospectives.

It is this notion of broadening which lies at the heart of what we see as the future for game history, or rather histo*ries*, to reflect the polyvocal nature of historical discourse. To go beyond the limited scope of the dominant accounts, historians working around games must attend to more factors, more elements in their study; both local and global are important, player and producer, success and failure. The histories which we advocate would explore the broader context within which games sit, and would arise from the coming together of the study of games culture with the study of cultural history to produce new and effective histories concerned with games. We are careful not to restrict this discussion to histories "of" games, for reasons which we will engage with below, as we explore some of the ideas which underpin our proposal. In short, we advance a proposal for *cultural game histories*, which rests upon a number of conjunctions between those three ideas.

4. Games (and) culture

The relationship between games and culture is complex, both in terms of the ways in which games are or can be thought of as cultural, but also in terms of the ways in which they exist within a framework of culture: of the conception, production, circulation and consumption of cultural objects, and in relation to the culture of a society or societies, those things defined by historian Peter Burke as "customs, values and a way of life" (Burke, 2008, p. 34). Yet, before we engage with games' cultural nature, we must reflect on what we mean here by games. A number of scholars have advanced views on the definition of a game or games, grounded within different linguistic contexts which have a strong potential to nuance their view (e.g. Caillois, 1958/2001; Huizinga, 1938/2014). As Juul (2005, p. 29) indicates, just reflecting on western European languages suggests that there is little consistency between our understanding of the relationship between *games* and *play*, with German, French

and Spanish eliding the two ideas (or perhaps never separating them), Scandinavian languages clearly separating them and English (as so often) appearing to adopt a confused middle ground. Historically, however, English had included a gerund—"gaming", from game—to refer to gambling (a word which is not itself attested until later), as well as the now obsolete "gamel", meaning to play games (Barnhart, 1988, p. 420). In more recent times, the meaning of "gaming" has shifted, however. It is thought to have been in the 1980s that it came to refer to playing video games specifically; it, and related formations—gamer, to game—have taken on further, sometimes politicised, meanings, contentions which appear to add to, rather than to help resolve, the linguistic complexity.

For English-speakers, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that games are often seen as a subset of play (something less clearly logical in, for example, Danish: Juul, 2005, pp. 28–9). Whether or not is the case, we might accept the provisions of Juul's "classic game model" in discussing them.[1] Here, games are rule-based activities, formal systems with a variety of quantified and differentiated outcomes, receiving investments of effort and emotion from players and with consequences which are optional and negotiable (2005, pp. 6–7, 36–43). For the purposes of this discussion, however, we also need to consider a particular element of further definition: the extent to which, as well as being considered as activities or, more preferably, practices, games can also be considered to be objects.

Video games, in particular, are recognised as forms of media, and can thus be characterised as cultural forms, concerned with the production of symbolic meaning. However, given that playground activities like tag and bulldog have a claim to the appellation of game which is just as strong as (and, historically, far stronger than) that of *Call of Duty*, we have difficulty positioning games within a continuum of sense. As a game, tag is an activity or a practice, with (often loosely) defined rules, but the nature of *Call of Duty* necessitates that it is something of an object too. Importantly, no props or equipment are required to play tag, yet *Call of Duty* is entirely dependent upon the affordances of a video game platform, and the software that it runs. Equally, board games such as *Monopoly* draw on more or less bespoke elements to create their game environment, card games similarly, and the same is true of a range of different sports. Importantly, if I sell my copy of *Monopoly* (or, for argument's sake, my never-installed copy of *Call of Duty*), in common parlance I no longer own that game. But what I have sold is not an experience, is not an activity or a practice, but an object (or collection of objects) which affords an activity or practice. If I can recreate those objects (if I have sold my backgammon set, but can find some bottle tops, chalk and wood to make dice), I once again "own" that game.

We might, then, advance the idea that games are in fact *only* rules, which structure our interaction with particular objects to create experience/an activity/a practice. But this seems insufficient; the objects *are* particular to a game, even if they are only representative—you still need *enough* counters to represent your sheep, soldiers, or range of diseases, even if those counters are just wooden cubes. Indeed, as games get more complex, the affordances offered by these objects, by these particular technologies, become more and more intrinsic to the nature of the experience, more and more "the game" itself. Thus, while the only objects in a game of tag might be people, and they can theoretically be any people as long as they want to play tag, the objects in the most recent *Call of Duty* releases are extremely specific: highly complicated, licence-controlled software, specific platforms on which to run it, and in the case of multiplayer, similarly equipped others to play with.

The extent to which games are objects, and the fact that they are *afforded by* objects to some extent, is central to consideration of their cultural nature. Given what we have already said, it would seem that we cannot consider games as objects (or collections thereof), unless of course we are willing to characterise practices and rules as objects as well: conceptual objects, therefore, rather than physical ones. Certainly, the conception and reception of culture, its circulation, consumption and production, is a process most commonly manifested through objects, and we can see that these processes take place for games: a phenomenon addressed in Baudrillard's 1968 study *The System of Objects* (Baudrillard, 2005), where the idea of play, of the ludic, is, following Foucault, essential to the genealogy of consumption. Indeed, the recognition that the circulation of game objects is a cultural

activity has long been recognised not only in terms of the creative or cultural economy (where it appears both through direct sales but also through tourism—for example, through reproductions of the Isle of Lewis chess set) but also in diplomatic terms (for example, the Polish nation's presentation of a copy of *The Witcher 2* to Barack Obama in 2011). Yet, we must also be mindful that these objects are often divorced from other materials, including rules and practices which, as noted, we must consider as part of the game. This is particularly notable for historic games such as the *tafl* family of boardgames, where rules often have to be reconstructed based on assumptions rather than being "known". Increasingly, of course, it is also true for far more modern but equally vulnerable video games, where the correct platforms (i.e. some of the physical objects) are no longer available to provide the affordances of play. Inconsistent practices, such as "house rules" of placing money on Free Parking in *Monopoly*, for example, serve to illustrate how practices of gameplay might be lost even when materiality and rules are transferred.

This suggests that the elements of the game circulate (or are separable from one another) in a similar manner, and might provide further support for thinking of both rules and play practices as objects. Much like their physical counterparts, the conceptual objects of rules and practices afford a game experience; this perhaps allows us to conceive of a game as a collection of objects which afford a game experience: *the* game of *Monopoly* affords *a* game of *Monopoly*. These objects are conceived, produced, circulated and consumed, together or separately, and through these mechanisms games do cultural work.

5. Games, culture and history

In considering these matters in terms of history, then, we might position the affordances necessary to play games within a continuum, running from concepts and people alone (tag) through to those offered by the full weight of contemporary gaming technology (*Call of Duty*). If we conceive of games in this way, video games become simply a subset of games which require a particularly large amount of affordances from a series of media and other technologies. Equally, board games are another subset of games which require affordances from a series of technologies, media (e.g. *Atmosfear*) and otherwise. Thus, to consider the advent of video games as a significant break in the continuum of play is misguided and undermines our capacity to engage with the rich past of play and games in a productive manner. In game studies as with media studies more broadly, where this situation has been notably critiqued by James Curran (2002), non-historians have demonstrated a tendency to see the past in terms of breaks around technological advances, even though these do not often represent a significant practical change in the human context. Indeed, we might consider it less important that early video games were played on computers than that they were often played by solitary individuals, arguably a shift in cultural practice. However, although perhaps less clearly remarked than group play, solitaire (i.e. individual) play had long been a commonplace, and the fact that arcade and console gaming has commonly taken place in a social context, and that early videogames such as *Spacewar!* and *Tennis for Two* afforded only multiplayer options—were "2UP"—suggests that even this change is not as significant as we might imagine.[2]

In any case, two premises hold true around the history of game playing: firstly, that humans have shown a propensity to use the technologies at hand to afford themselves access to forms of play which interest them; and secondly, that the same technology is often used in different ways in differently *cultural* contexts. Thus, in thinking about games and culture, and in thinking about games as practices and rules as well as objects, we might conceive of games as cultural not only because they produce symbolic meaning, or that they represent culturally situated conceptions and ideas, but that they also provoke cultural responses which are clearly grounded in the cultures which engage with and play them.

As with games, for the purposes of this work we must also have a clear understanding of what we mean by history. In the material surveyed above, we chart a distinction between "kinds" of historical work; in practical terms, what we are really suggesting is a division between work which we would look on as history, and work which is of a more archaeological, museological-preservationist or

technological bent. Much of the history written about games is grounded in approaches which arise from Media Studies, a discipline particularly indebted to ideas about history arising from the work of Foucault, among others. Throughout *The Order of Things* (1966/1974), Foucault distinguished between two approaches to knowledge, which he referred to as "vertical" and "horizontal"; in terms of the past, these equate to what he called (somewhat metaphorically) the "archaeological" and "historical", respectively. Foucault himself was concerned with the vertical, the archaeological; the connection of language to underlying values, the continuation or ruptures in thinking across changing historical periods. He was thus more interested in texts than the biographies of their authors, divorcing them, we might say, from their *human* context. So while Foucault indicated clearly that the history of man was the foundation of all other histories (1966/1974, p. 370), such an archaeological analysis is object-focused and often, without perhaps meaning to be, teleological. It situates objects in a continuum with the past, but through a theoretical frame which prompts questions such as "how did we get here?", rather than "what happened next?"

For us, history should be defined in terms of its relation to the human condition: history as a component subject of the humanities; and, indeed, this approach to the past chimes with Foucault's other mode—the horizontal. History as a discipline is principally concerned with people; as George Ewart Evans noted, "this is to make a song of a discovery of the obvious, but it is something that needs to be repeated" (2009, p. 25). In particular, it is concerned with what E.H. Carr referred to as "the past of man in society" (1964, p. 48) – the past, then, of people and the institutions, organisations and ideologies that they create through their interactions. Historians thus seek to avoid discourses and narratives determined by, or indeed principally focused upon, the life of objects divorced from their connection to or impact upon the aforementioned people. Indeed, it was the negotiation of this position which troubled the development of the discipline of the history of science, as Lowood (2006) indicates. Lowood discusses the importance of humans to history in relation to the constitution of the field of Game Studies, but it is equally (and in fact more directly) connected with the history of games too; concentrated on the object, such an approach to the past loses its humanity and, for many historians, its historicality. Indeed, when we think of video games in particular, Evans' rejoinder seems even more pertinent: this position, he observed, deserved repetition in the face "of wonderfully ingenious discoveries and inventions that have cascaded on people in an embarrassment of rich promises" (2009, p. 25). The promise of technology and software distracts our gaze all too readily.

We have already indicated how we might think about games and play as conceptual objects which are cultural both in their conception and in their reception. Thus, to think about the cultural history of games is to locate this cultural conception and reception in a broader human context which encompasses not only the workers who produced them but the activities and practices of all those who engaged with them in some way, whether to regulate them, to advocate for or against them, to play them in arcades or at home, to sell or buy (access to) them. Important, also, is the comparative understanding gained from imagining not only locally grounded histories which describe narrowly regional forms (e.g. arcades) or phenomena (e.g. a 1980s crash), but in the connection between these ideas, between regions, in pursuit of a broader conception of what is at "play". As Ben-Zaken (2013) has recently signalled, it is in the circulation of cultural objects and people outside their own cultures that we sometimes get the clearest sense of cultural history: What do others make of our culture, and how does their engagement clarify our own?

6. Cultural game histories

There is thus no single, "global" history of games (contrary to the presentations of much existing literature), but the circulation of objects and ideas beyond their context of production helps us to better understand the game histories before us. We therefore propose that we should strive to understand games as conceptual objects situated at the centre of a number of histories, only few of which at present are being explored. The balance of current approaches threatens to provide us with a hegemonic history of the past of record, rather than a corpus of histories which explores the memories of and testimonies about a variety of cultural experiences of, and contexts for,

the production, consumption and circulation of games. The kinds of histories we seek are not those which aim to formalise and structure our understanding of the past of games, but rather those which, through a discursive historical process, open up this past and make it available to us. This is a past with many dimensions and histories of it must respond to this variety; the need for availability, for *accessibility*, makes it an inherently public past, and increasingly we must therefore produce histories which address those publics.

Cultural game histories emerge from communities with games at their heart just as much as they emerge from the games themselves. They are not necessarily complete or coherent; they are often, in common with the genealogical methodology favoured here, contested, messy, potentially incomplete, perhaps fractured, accounts. They reflect marginal voices alongside those of renowned industry luminaries, those of players *and* creators, buyers *and* sellers, hackers *and* regulators. And if it is tempting to see video game histories in particular as complete histories due to their relative chronological proximity, we must remember that our understanding of the past remains inherently incomplete, partial and subjective. Thus, when we write about the histories of and around games, we must avoid the desire to adopt the role of omniscient narrators. In these histories, as in all histories, we are as much players as we are producers; we cannot always penetrate the fog of war which surrounds our past.

With this in mind, we must be acutely sensitive to the kinds of histories which our evidence allows us to write, not only in terms of the breadth of opportunities presented by our sources but the very real constraints which they exercise on our knowledge. We cannot think of the efflorescence of preservation activity around games, recorded in detail by writers like Guins (2014), as simply an attempt to safeguard games' past. The activity of preservation is both selective and curatorial; it represents an interpretation of the games culture of a particular period, rather than an unbiased and authentic reflection of that culture. As historians engage with these materials, with meticulously restored arcade cabinets, scanned magazines and carefully edited interviews, we must retain a sense that our access is to a deliberately mediated past. Consequently, the importance of the collection of authentic, unedited oral histories cannot be overstated, not only to inform our contemporary studies of a past within living memory, but to reinforce the foundations upon which historians of the future, with far greater critical distance, will establish the significance of our present.

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Citation information
Cite this article as: A future for game histories?, Alex Wade & Nick Webber, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1212635.

Notes
1. Although perhaps not the model itself. In discussing the model, Juul moves from "rules" to "fixed rules" as characteristic of games, banishing pen and paper role-playing games (RPGs) to the borders between games and non-games for having rules which "are not fixed beyond discussion" (Juul, 2005, p. 43). This is unsatisfying in a number of ways: firstly, in that these games operate within a structure which deploys a series of rules and guidelines backed with referee interpretation, in a manner similar to a number of sports (which he would not

discount as fringe cases); secondly, in that Juul himself notes that games anyway require ambiguous rules to be discussed before play can continue (37); and thirdly, in that, especially given the linguistic complexities of the issue, we have to attend to the fact that the vast majority of people call RPGs games, and any convincing model must account for that.
2. Huhtamo (2005, p. 16) demonstrates the historical aspects of competing terminologies around the term "videogame" (e.g. TV game, computer game) a notion which is reflected across space, where different terms are used at a local level throughout the world (Wolf, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, we have chosen to retain the linguistically adequate term "videogame", which encompasses these important spatial and temporal differences and allows for comprehension through space and time.

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