Creating Game History

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Creating Game History: Intertextuality and the Formation of a Collective Memory of Games

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ABSTRACT

Some video games have had a lasting impact on games that followed, either through their gameplay, graphics, or world-creation processes or through the sociocultural structures they helped to establish. If game makers incorporate these games within other games, their importance and legacy are emphasized. This appreciation, which is frequently presented in a very nostalgic way, has the effect of creating a collective memory of games, inscribing them in game history. This essay analyzes various modes of intertextual links between games and their impact on the creation of a collective memory of games in the context of the arcade game culture, the Game Boy as an icon of gaming detached from a predefined space, and self-references by game makers to their own games.

1. INTRODUCTION: OF INTERTEXTUALITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND NOSTALGIA

Video games underlie rapid changes due to permanent technological innovations, which allow game makers to present games to their players in novel ways, such as new gameplay modalities, innovative world-creation processes, or an increased potential for interactivity. Simultaneously, some video games are designed in a mode that draws on older games, either in the form of allusions to or explicit discussions of them. They thereby create a critical discourse about the history of video games while keeping specific genres, types, or modes of video games, as well as particular platforms or devices, in the consciousness of video game makers, players, and anyone else connected to video games, such as critics, reviewers, and academics. There are some games that appear to timelessly stay in our collective memory of games. *Tetris* (1984)[1] is such a game. Even people who have never played it might maintain some form of connection with its gameplay mode, graphics, or music; it has become part of our collective memory. But how do some games achieve this continuity of presence while others are more or less forgotten? In some cases—*Tetris* again is an example—popular culture takes up the game and incorporates it in other media. In less frequent cases, game history is created through in-game references, meaning that one video game incorporates another game, focusing on specific gameplay modes, familiar graphics, or a whole genre. Some video games even incorporate playable versions of older games within themselves, which allows players to experience them through playing them. This essay focuses on playable games-within-games and analyzes their influence on the creation of a collective memory of games and game history.

Video games consist of interlinked networks of individual elements, such as graphics, a story, characters, or gameplay modalities. In this regard, video games are similar to texts, defined by Jorge J. E. Gracia as "a group of entities, used as signs, which are selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain context to convey some specific meaning to an audience."[2] Text is nonrandom, intentional, and fabricated, taking on various forms—such as video games. As texts, video games can potentially be intertextual, which is understood, in Norman Fairclough's words, as "a matter of recontextualization."[3] For games-within-games, it is helpful to depart from Julia Kristeva's original understanding of intertextuality and instead adopt Gérard Genette's definition, namely that of "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence

of one text within another."[4] Within the framework of game studies, Genette's idea can be linked to Mia Consalvo's argument that intertextuality in video games is characterized as a "sophisticated understanding of the 'text' and its place in the greater marketplace."[5] In this sense, intertextuality is the (posterior) incorporation of other forms in a new context, such as a game within another game, which tells us something about the relationship between this past game and present ones. This deduction from Fairclough's and Consalvo's definitions already implies intertextuality's practical functions, characterized by Mary Orr as the "(re)evaluation by means of comparison, counter-position and contrast."[6] Through incorporating games-within-games, intertextual links help to establish the collective memory of video games, which influences the creation of game history.

Intertextual links to earlier games created by game makers through consciously referencing older titles in the games they produce evoke in players an awareness of the presence of specific games in the collective game memory and game history. James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III define collective memory as "a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by a group."[7] In this, it differs from history, which, according to Nathan Rotenstreich, is "a course of events taking place in the course of time," with the question being "whether and where in the course of events the conjunction between occurrences and significance is most prominent."[8] A historical account is a retelling of the past from multiple perspectives in order to generate a more or less objective account validated by some form of evidence, such as historical documents, data, or interviews with contemporary witnesses. Writing history is, therefore, an official practice, while creating a collective memory is formed out of private, and often subconscious, endeavors. In the context of video games, however, a neat distinction between collective memory and history cannot be drawn, because through embedding specific games within other games, game creators make conscious decisions regarding the formation of game history. Therefore, I propose that game history is heavily influenced by collective game memory, while game history spans beyond collective memory to also include other historical game elements, such as game engine innovations, gamer demographics, or industry developments.

This process of generating a collective game memory also differs from a game canon, because the latter is created by some form of authority. A canon is, in Matthew Arnold's words, "the best that has been thought and said,"[9] hence a collection of cultural artifacts that are worth preserving for the after-world. Games inscribed into

collective memory, however, need not be "good" games but can be exceptional precisely because they are "bad." The characteristic of a canon as a collection of games considered good by a jury of some kind is evident when looking at examples of game canons. One formally developed list of essential games one should play was presented by Henry Lowood, Matteo Bittanti, Christopher Grant, Steve Meretzky, and Warren Spector in "Ten Games You Need to Play: The Digital Game Canon."[10] Semi or nonofficial game canons are "The best games of [the year]" lists, which are published online by game critics on platforms such as *Polygon* or *Metacritic*, and ratings by players found in online discussion forums such as *NeoGAF*, *GameFAQS*, and *IGN*. Similarly, rankings of the most-sold games per platform, often within a predefined time frame, such as Steam's "Top Sellers" list[11] or the "Top Selling Title Sales Unit" published for the Nintendo Switch,[12] function as canons. These game canons are created through conscious efforts either by people or through algorithms, and the games found on them need to possess characteristics that make them superior to other games based on the aspect(s) the canon creators focus on. The collective memory created through the intertextual links discussed below, however, works on a different level, because the status of games included in other games does not tell us anything about their exceptional quality but simply asserts their presence and inscribes them in the consciousness of players, game makers, and game critics, and thus, game history.

The incorporation of older games within new ones can be understood as a form of homage, one that mirrors the game makers' nostalgia and is communicated to the players of the new game. The original meaning of nostalgia as specified by Johannes Hofer, however, has been that of a pathological symptom linked to a pernicious longing for a place, particularly home.[13] Since its shift from a pathology to an emotion toward the end of the nineteenth century, nostalgia has been associated with a positive longing for the past rather than a corrupting compulsion. Additionally, questions have been raised regarding the concept that is being longed for. Svetlana Boym has phrased this discussion as follows:

> *At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desire to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.*[14]

This shift from place to time, however, is problematic in Linda Hutcheon's view, because "[t]ime, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible."[15] The feeling of nostalgia thus cannot be satisfied; in reality, it is impossible to go back in time. For video games (and other media utilizing nonreal temporal conceptions), however, it is possible to go back in time and replay the games we know from our past—we can play *Tetris* on a Game Boy or the original *Pong* (1972)[16] on an arcade machine, and can also play them on new devices. This allows us to actively experience game history through replaying older titles on new devices. The emphasis here is on the temporal distance between individual experiences with the game. This differs from what Christopher Hansen has defined as the "centrality of replay and repetition to game temporality"[17] in general, meaning that we replay parts of a game over and over again in one sitting (or several sittings temporally close to each other) to overcome an obstacle or improve our skills, or for grinding purposes. The interactivity of video games makes game history livable, which allows for a deeper connection with the past space and time. Replaying a video game is different from other kinds of media engagement that allow for repetition, such as rewatching a film or rereading a novel. The activities we fulfill in these replays create a different experience from our previous play encounter because the interactivity of video games results in individual modes of how a game is played, which can never be repeated. That is, while a film or a novel generally exists in exactly the same format, a game is different in every single playthrough because of the interactivity it offers to its player.

In order to better understand the formation of a collective memory of games, the discussion below only considers games, genres, or devices that existed in the past or, if modified, are recognized as existent in reality. The reason for this is that my interest lies in the relationship between intertextual links between games and their presence in the collective memory of games to generate game history. These games allow players to play their embedded games, and this high level of engagement with these games-within-games influences the awareness of their place in game history. Very often, these connections to older games are presented by the game makers in a very nostalgic mode. This invokes the player's personal experience with the referenced game, either directly by having played it in the past or indirectly by having encountered it secondhand—for example, in other media. The following section presents discussions of video games incorporating intertextual links to the arcade game culture, the Game Boy, and self-references to games within their own franchise, and uncovers the various modes through

which this supports the presence of some older video games in game history.

2. GAMES-WITHIN-GAMES AND THE FORMATION OF A COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF GAMES

Video games can intertextually reference other games through various mechanisms. In the analysis that follows, video games containing playable versions of other, older video games are discussed. These games are divided into larger groups, namely arcade games, games of one particular device, and games of the same franchise. For the individual analyses, the central question is how intertextual references help to create a collective memory of games, often by pointing to the origins of games and gaming from a highly nostalgic perspective. As will be evidenced below, the kind of reference made to older forms—i.e., if the intertextual link is made toward an individual game, specific gameplay mechanisms, a genre, or a gaming subculture— does not have an impact on the creation of collective memory. The reason for this is that frequently, the game alluded to represents a whole group of games, making it impossible to draw a line between these individual modes.

A large group of intertextual links established within video games are those made to arcade games and the arcade gaming subculture. Games accessed through coin-operated machines, such as *Pong*, were a great success due to their simple gameplay mechanics and because they could be played on a low budget.[18] One of the first arcade games that has reached a widespread audience and thus helped to initiate the "Golden Age" of arcade gaming in the 1970s and 1980s was Taito's *Space Invaders* (1978).[19] Early arcade games like this one still feature prominently in later and even present-day video games, to the effect that the association with a specific time (and place) continues to have an impact today.

There are various modes through which these intertextual links can be established. One is to have physical arcade machines in the game world on which the avatar can play games. Examples are arcades featuring the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–2013)[20] games. Arcade machines are found in public places, including restaurants, bars, launderettes, or shops, evoking similarities to real-life arcade culture. Although these playable games do not exist in reality, they resemble known games based on their graphics, gameplay, or story. *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* (2004)[21] features a game called *Let's Get Ready to Bumble*, in which the player navigates a bee collecting flowers. This 2-D platform game is allusive of Tehkan's arcade game *Bomb Jack* (1984)[22], utilizing the same gameplay modalities.[23] Since

players can access this game through their avatar playing it, the intertextual link asserts the place of *Bomb Jack* in the collective game memory.

Another example of a playable arcade game is found in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008),[24] namely *QUB³D*. Players need to match up at least four blocks of the same color to remove them before the screen fills up. This game bears a strong similarity to *Puyo Puyo* (1991)[25] and *Tetris*, which are identified with the youthful subculture associated with arcade machines. Similar to these two games, *QUB³D* is a 2-D game presented in a retro style that follows simple objectives.[26] What is interesting about *QUB³D* (and *Let's Get Ready to Bumble*) is that the player's scores are logged in a highscore list, which can be accessed on any arcade machine of the same style within the game world. This feature further contributes to the nostalgic association with the arcade gaming subculture, namely in the battle for first place. These allusions to older video games evoke associations with them and recall characteristics of arcade gaming, symbolizing leisure time, youth, positive distraction, and insouciance. A look at a YouTube video, for example, in which a player of *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* reaches 6,204 points in *Let's Get Ready to Bumble*, illustrates this connection to arcade game nostalgia. In the comments on the video, viewers compare and challenge each other's highscores, mimicking the arcade highscore rivalry.[27] The "*Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* Record Book"[28] even allows players to log their points, thus creating its own highscore list beyond the one found within *San Andreas*.

Games of the *Grand Theft Auto* series are not the only ones referencing arcade games. *Shenmue* (1999)[29] and *Shenmue II* (2001)[30] feature two playable arcade games that have an existence outside their game worlds. The first game, *Hang-On* (1985),[31] is a motorcycle racing game originally produced by Sega. Ryo Hazuki, the protagonist of the *Shenmue* game universe, can play it by jumping onto a motorbike model with the Sega logo imprinted on it, featuring a screen showing the game. In addition, the Tomato Convenience Store and the Harbor Lounge raffle a copy of the game, which Ryo can play on his Sega Saturn. The same is true for the second arcade game incorporated within the *Shenmue* games, *Space Harrier* (1985).[32] This game, also produced by Sega, is a third-person shoot 'em up. The player needs to navigate the protagonist, Harrier, with a flight stick and shoot various targets, such as Chinese dragons or prehistoric mammals, as well as several bosses. *Hang-On* and *Space Harrier* both possess remarkable places in the history of game development: They were among the first arcade games to utilize 16-bit graphics and the Super Scaler arcade system board, which helped

to mimic 3D effects.[33] Both games have been co-developed by Yu Suzuki, the pioneer of arcade gaming, who has had a lasting influence on video games to date.[34] Incorporating two of his co-authored games in another game world developed by him inscribe his legacy into a group of games with a significant impact on game history.

Moving on chronologically from arcade machines, one device has clearly revolutionized the gaming experience and thus has a special place in game history: the Game Boy. Developed by Nintendo and first released in 1989, the Game Boy has quickly become a cult object, one with symbolic value for an emerging gaming culture.[35] Its detachedness from any notion of place due to its portability transformed the gaming experience for a whole generation (and beyond). It is therefore not surprising that contemporary games allude to the Game Boy either through apparatuses akin to it or even through the actual device. *Fallout 4* (2015)[36] and *Fallout 76* (2018)[37] feature a game called *Red Menace*, which can be played on a Pip-Boy. Although the primary function of this device is storing information about its wearer, it also allows the avatar to play games. However, this is only possible through inserting a cartridge, which first has to be found in the game world. The physicality through which *Red Menace* is accessed already implies its link to the Game Boy, a conclusion further supported by looking at the game itself: The aim is to avoid bombs and barrels in order to rescue Vault Girl. In its gameplay, story, and graphics, the game is highly allusive of Nintendo's original *Donkey Kong* (1981),[38] which was released for Game Boy in 1994.[39] Jennifer deWinter has observed that it "was the first game to require jumping to traverse gaps and spring over enemies, and this development provided the core game mechanic of the platformer game."[40] *Donkey Kong* thus has had a lasting impact on the evolution of game mechanics, by introducing gameplay elements that are still in use today, hence initiating two new genres, namely platform and jump'n'run games.

Games developed by the Nintendo franchise seem to receive a lot of appreciation through their appearance in other games, most notably those of the Nintendo family. In this sense, the collective game memory and game history are initiated and established by the game developers themselves. Examples are *Donkey Kong 64* (1999),[41] in which the player can play the original *Donkey Kong* as well as the arcade shooter *Jetpac* (1983);[42] and *Super Mario RPG* (1996),[43] which allows players to play *Beetle Mania* on a Game Boy—a game that is allusive of the second-level Yoshi's Island 2 in *Super Mario World* (1990).[44] *Animal Crossing* (2001)[45] even contains a large selection of Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) games, such as *Balloon Fight* (1984),[46] *Clu Clu Land* (1984),[47] and *Wario's Woods* (1994).[48] Further

games can be obtained through cheating devices, such as *Super Mario Bros*. (1985)[49] and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986).[50] Through incorporating other games of the franchise in their later titles, Nintendo achieves several effects at once. First, the older games are not forgotten but are, within their new game world, positioned as games that are fun to play. Second, through establishing links to these older titles, players can recall their personal gaming experience if they have played the original games. This has the effect that, third, a sense of nostalgia is potentially created through these intertextual links, meaning that positive associations with the games are generated. Finally, this functions as cross-advertisement between individual titles, based on their everlasting presence in other games, without constituting copyright issues.

The inclusion of games by the same developer and/or publisher within other games thus has several positive impacts on the originals and the new titles. This is probably the reason Nintendo is not the only company that has practiced this method.[51] Lucasfilm Games' graphic adventure game *Maniac Mansion* (1987)[52] received major critical acclaim for its gameplay, design, and story creation elements upon its release. Most notably, its Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion (SCUMM) engine, developed by Robert Gilbert and Aric Wilmunder in 1987 for the Commodore 64 version of *Maniac Mansion*, has had a lasting influence on graphic adventure games.[53] Michael L. Black has argued that games utilizing it "would distinguish themselves from others in the graphical adventure genre more for the narratives presented onscreen than for any aspect of their gameplay."[54] This means that *Maniac Mansion* was among the first games that drew on forms of cinematic storytelling, including nonlinear narration and cutscenes, which would become devices frequently used in narrative video games that followed. Due to the novelty the SCUMM engine brought to the gaming experience, the legacy of *Maniac Mansion* is apparent. To enforce its importance further, LucasArts has presented a homage to it in the second part of *Maniac Mansion*, entitled *Day of the Tentacle* (1993).[55] One of the Commodore-style computers contains a fully playable version of *Maniac Mansion*. This intertextual link not only evokes nostalgia but encourages an understanding of the heritage of the game the player is currently playing, thus emphasizing the original title's importance to game history due to the development of the SCUMM engine that created it.

The games discussed in the first three parts of this chapter—arcade games, Game Boy games, and games of the Nintendo, the Sega, and the Lucasfilm/LucasArts franchises—are early examples of visualized game worlds through which the player navigates an

avatar. A different kind of game that has had a lasting impact on many video games that followed is the text-based adventure game *Zork* (1980).[56] The game manages to create a rich story-world, in which players can change elements by typing in verb-noun commands and combining them with conjunctions and prepositions. *Zork* thus uses language to create its rich and complex universe. Later narrative games aim at combining a graphic world depiction with a story to support the avatar's actions. One such example is Activision's first-person shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010).[57] Remarkably, this game contains a playable version of *Zork* as an Easter egg. Players enter the game by typing the command "zork" into a computer in the questioning room, which starts a fully playable version of *Zork.* Due to the lack of graphics utilized in creating the game world, this embedded game creates a powerful contrast to the detailed world of *Black Ops.* The discrepancy between the two games forming the intertextual link has the effect that a strong sense of nostalgia for the early days of computer gaming is created, which most gamers probably have only experienced secondhand. This shows that *Zork* is still seen as a key game in game history, which is evident in Activision's incorporating it in *Black Ops*, thus emphasizing its legacy.

3. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Intertextual links established between more recent and past video games exert a strong influence on the creation of a collective game memory and game history, particularly if the games are playable. The three modes discussed here—inclusions of arcade games, allusions to the Game Boy, and self-references to games by the same gaming franchise—assert the presence of past titles in the consciousness of players engaging with the new games that incorporate these games-within-games. The games alluded to are generally characterized by a distinguished component or attribute that has had a lasting influence on game history. For the discussed games, these features have mainly concerned gameplay, graphics, world-creation processes, and the sociocultural structures created by them. It has to be reiterated, however, that the incorporation of games-within-games does not establish a canon of video games, because the intertextual links do not tell us anything about the value or importance of these games. Arguably, through the conscious choices made by game makers to include another game within the ludic realm of their new title, a sense of authority over the presence of certain games is generated; however, its purpose is not to form a canon but to function as an homage to previous works.

BIO

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