

Perspectives on the History of Computer Games

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*[I]t is probable, but not proven, that play at video games accustoms the player to the kind of activity that computers also require. One must sit down in front of a computer-like object and manage it in much the same way by levers and controls that a computer is managed. As in the case of the computer, there is immediate feedback for right and wrong choices. The management system of both game and computer are thus similar. It would be surprising if skill at one did not transfer to skill at the other; or if the attitude of being at ease with one did not transfer to being at ease with the other. (pp. 73–74)*¹

—Brian Sutton-Smith

In less than a decade, a multidisciplinary field of inquiry has grown up around the study of *computer games*—a phrase that includes any digital game format based on computer hardware or software. We are devoting an issue of this scholarly journal to the history of computer games not merely to establish the rapid rise of game studies to respectability or to celebrate the industry's maturity. This special issue of the *Annals* covers international perspectives on the history of computer games. Our purpose is to explore the potential that serious study of computing used for recreational or entertainment purposes such as games or virtual worlds provides as well as the new opportunities it offers for critically engaging the history of computing.

Brian Sutton-Smith has argued for more than 20 years in books such as his *Toys as Culture* that play is culturally significant. Computer games in particular serve the serious purpose of providing various adaptive advantages such as developing users' skills and confidence in their abilities. Specifically, he argued that "the adaptive problem to which the video game is a response is the computer," which he considered as culturally important a technology as "printing was to the sixteenth century" (p. 62).¹

If we are successful in matching critical historical studies of computer games to this standard, tones of approval and disapproval, justification and critique, will be recognized and debated in ways that reflect wider issues on studies of the impact of games on society, culture, religion, warfare, and other aspects of life, just as with the history of science in recent decades. Reaching the conviction that games are this important—that they are representative, symptomatic, and impact-causing—leads us to conclude that they deserve scholarly attention. Frans Mäyrä has opined that it will hardly be "possible to stop young researchers from studying games when they have spent their formative years engaged with digital games and can perceive the

evident role it has in the lives of their generation."² The rapid rise of the new academic discipline of game studies supports this conclusion.

As this discussion suggests, the collection of articles in this volume takes the history of computer games seriously. The topics run the gamut from early computer games to recent game platforms. Digital games have been played on devices and platforms ranging from the home television, arcade consoles, and handheld devices to personal computers, mainframes, and network servers. Still, there are common themes. An important thread through these historical studies is the layering of contexts for the development of computer games, ranging from business, social, and legal interests to the different aspects of the development of computing, including programming, hacking, display technologies, and digital rights management.

Along with multiple contexts, the articles also reveal important connections between computer games and other technologies and media, such as television and video engineering. Taken together, the articles in this special issue make a strong case for the interconnectedness of games and the many "adaptive problems" encountered by producers and users of computer technology since the 1950s.

References and Notes

1. B. Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture*, Gardner, 1986.
2. F. Mäyrä, "A Moment in the Life of a Generation: Why Game Studies Now?," *Games and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, p. 105.

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