Gaming in Meatspace

By Charles Day

One evening earlier this summer, I was enjoying a martini at a hotel bar in San Francisco’s Soma District. Although I’d brought an engrossing book to read—_Tokyo Year Zero_ by David Peace—I looked up now and then at the bar’s TV to watch the Miami Heat strive to nullify the Boston Celtics’ large early lead in game four of the NBA East finals.

During a commercial break, I became transfixed by a trailer for what seemed like an exciting new horror movie. Humans and zombies were fighting each other in a dark, empty New York and a bright, crowded Hong Kong. To catch the scenes of mayhem, the camera swooped, panned, and zoomed with unnatural agility and speed, greatly intensifying the thrills.

It turned out the camera work was unnatural. The trailer was not promoting a Hollywood movie, but an Xbox and PlayStation video game, _Resident Evil 6_. My long-held disdain for video games had been challenged!

The first video game I encountered was _Space Invaders_, which appeared in one of my hometown pubs around 1980. In case you’ve forgotten or never knew, the game’s object is to shoot down an armada of alien spacecraft, each depicted within a 16 × 16-pixel grid. But crude graphics weren’t what put me off _Space Invaders_ and its descendants. Rather, I couldn’t see the point of acquiring the skill needed to win: the ability to press the controller’s buttons quickly and accurately. I still don’t—even to play _Resident Evil 6_ on a 1,920 × 1,080-pixel monitor.

Besides making me reconsider video games, my chance encounter with computer-animated zombies made me wonder why I’ve recently come to enjoy playing board games, despite the gulf between the games’ typically rich scenarios and their manifestly artificial boards. In _Railways of England and Wales_, for example, players vie to build the most profitable rail network between a limited number of major towns and cities, just as their historical counterparts did in the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign.

Although the board and accoutrements of _Railways of England and Wales_ are somewhat cartoonish, my fellow players Jan, Kate, Kevin, Stacy, Ty and I borrowed money, laid down track, bought rolling stock, and transported goods with gusto. The locally brewed beer and home-pulled pork served by our hosts, Stacy and Ty, added to the enjoyment.

So why do I prefer playing at railway barony on a cartoonish board to shooting zombies on a realistically rendered street? Paradoxically, when it comes to human behavior, _Railways of England and Wales_ seems more realistic than _Resident Evil 6_. Whereas real railway barons schemed while sitting in chairs and looking at maps, “real” zombie hunters should be running outside and shooting weapons. The first activity resembles its corresponding game; the second doesn’t.

But even if I don’t succumb to the attraction of playing video games, I’m affected by their popularity. You are, too. In an article published last year, ¹ Martin Hilbert and Priscila López determined that video games consumed 42 percent of the world’s capacity to store information in 2007, up from 5 percent in 2000. Video games’ share of total CPUs grew at a similar rate, from 5 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2007. Your next home computer could be optimized for _Resident Evil 6_, whether you play the game or not.

Reference


Charles Day is _Physics Today_’s online editor. Echo is a 10-month-old Airedale terrier.

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