



ONCE UPON A TIME, THE GREATEST OF ALL MEDIA WAS BORN

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DEFINITION OF HISTORY

Field of knowledge based on the observation and description of past events that are considered ***WORTHY*** of mention.

(My translation, Petit Robert Dictionary)



THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE HISTORIAN

The fundamental need of human beings to create order out of chaos and to make congruent the discordant nature of human experiences often leads historians to articulate history around ***COHERENT NARRATIVE STRUCTURES***

(Ricoeur, 1983)



THE DESIRE FOR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The "desire for narrative structure" encourages game historians to look "for connections between events, influences, motivations, shared origins, diverging alternatives, and closure to round off with"

(Wolf, 2014: 155)



THE DESIRE FOR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Game historians build their narrative by:

- Choosing some events at the expense of others
- Categorizing them
- Articulating them in a particular way

(Loowood, 2014)



THE FASCINATION WITH THE MEDIUM

The fascination with the technical and commercial exploits of the medium encourages game historians to:

- act as "cheerleader"
- occult the negative aspects of the game industry

(Therrien & Picard, 201; Kline, 2014; Donovan, 2015: 13)

DOMINANCE OF TECHNO-INDUSTRIAL PERIOD MARKERS (DONOVAN, 2015; KLINE, 2014; THERRIEN & PICARD (2014))



THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE HISTORIAN

"Historians try, as much as possible, to **ERASE** what can betray the place from where they look, the moment when they exist, their bias, their **INESCAPABLE PASSION**. The historical sense, as Nietzsche describes it, does not refuse the system of its own **INJUSTICE**"

(My translation, Foucault, 2004: 412)

PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

- Draw on the vocabulary used by Elsaesser (2014) to categorize historical accounts of cinema
- Identify different narrative structures on the basis of which game history can be constructed
- Provide examples of historical accounts that rely on these structures
- Argue in favor of a foucauldian genealogical approach that better reflects the complexity of game history

THE PREHISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES

Two simplistic narratives revolving around the search for its "origins":

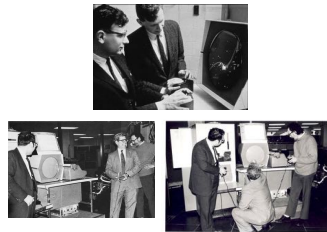
- 1) tracing back a single inventor and dating the birth of the medium
- 2) "prelapsarian picture of creative chaos"

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)

TRACING BACK A SINGLE INVENTOR AND DATING THE INVENTION OF THE MEDIUM

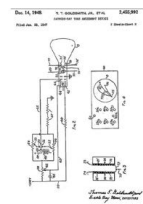
"Initially conceived by **STEVE RUSSELL, MARTIN GRAETZ AND WAYNE WHITANEN** in 1961, *Spacewar!* is considered one of the earliest video games for a digital computer. After MIT student Alan Kotok obtained sine and cosine routines from DEC, as shown in this letter from Margaret Wu, Steve Russell created the first version of *Spacewar!* in 1961. Significant improvements to the game were made in the spring of 1962 by Peter Samson, Dan Edwards and Martin Graetz."

Website: *Computer History*



TRACING BACK A SINGLE INVENTOR AND DATING THE INVENTION OF THE MEDIUM

Thomas Goldsmith & Estle Ray
Inventors of the cathode-ray tube
amusement device
1948



(Burnham, 2003)

TRACING BACK A SINGLE INVENTOR AND DATING THE INVENTION OF THE MEDIUM

Ralph Baer
Creator of the console
Magnavox Odyssey
1971



(Kent, 2001: 27)

TRACING BACK A SINGLE INVENTOR AND DATING THE INVENTION OF THE MEDIUM

Nolan Bushnell & Ted Dabney
Co-founders of Atari
and instigators of *Pong*
1972



(Dabney in
Dillon, 2011: ix)

TRACING BACK A SINGLE INVENTOR AND DATING THE INVENTION OF THE MEDIUM



Source: Arseneault (2009)

PRELAPSARIAN PICTURE OF CREATIVE CHAOS



PRELAPSARIAN PICTURE OF CREATIVE CHAOS



Alan Turing and
his computer
program for
playing chess
(1947)



Claude
Shannon and
his article
"Programming
a Computer for
Playing Chess"
(1950)



John Bennett
and Raymond
Stuart-Williams
with their
computer game
Nimrod
(1951)



William Higinbotham
and Robert Dvorak
with their oscilloscope
game *Tennis for two*
(1958)

FOUCAULDIAN GEOLOGICAL APPROACH

"What we find, at the historical beginning of things, is not the preserved identity of their origin – it is the discord of other things, the disparate". The best thing to do is to "study meticulously the coincidences of the beginnings by excavating the lowest depths"

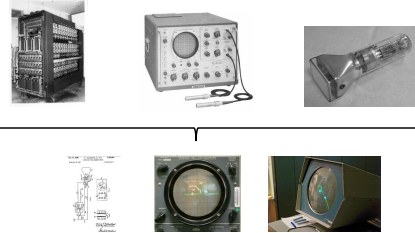
(My translation, Foucault, 2004: 394–398)

FOUCAULDIAN GEOLOGICAL APPROACH

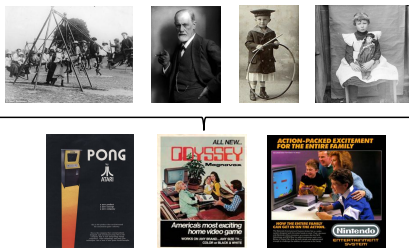
Methodological or analytical approach which consist in rigorous investigations into the **"HISTORICAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY"** for broad cultural formations

(Koopman, 2012)

SEARCH FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE CREATION OF VIDEO GAMES



SEARCH FOR THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONDITIONS OF THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF VIDEO GAMES



(Kline, 2014: 24-25)

THE HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES

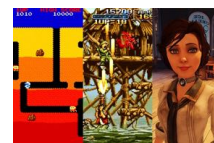
Can be articulated around various narrative structures:

1. "chronological-teleological"
2. "chronological-organic"
3. "bi-polar"
4. "epistemic breaks"
5. "cyclical"

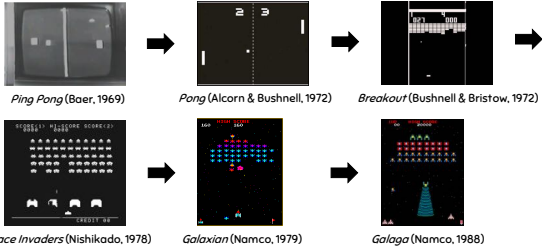
CHRONOLOGICAL-TELEOLOGICAL

- Linear progression toward a particular goal (Elsaesser, 2004: 80)
- Rhetoric of perpetual improvements and technological innovation (Therrien, 2012)

CHRONOLOGICAL-TELEOLOGICAL

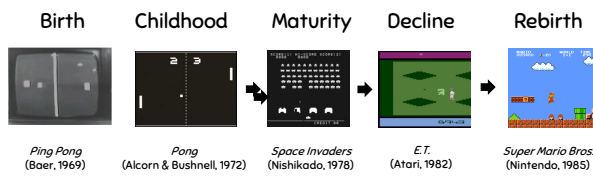
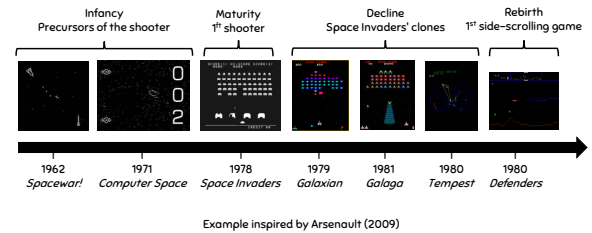


- Increasing quality of the graphics
- Growing richness of game narrative
- More and more immersive gaming experiences

CHRONOLOGICAL-TELEOLOGICAL**CHRONOLOGICAL-ORGANIC**

Linear evolution that is similar to the evolution of a living being (birth, childhood, maturity, decline, rebirth)

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)

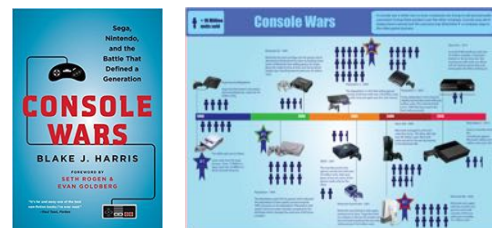
CHRONOLOGICAL-ORGANIC**CHRONOLOGICAL-ORGANIC**

Example inspired by Arsenaault (2009)

BI-POLAR

"Dialectic of binary oppositions"

(Elsaesser, 2004: 100)

BI-POLAR

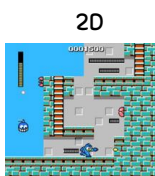
BI-POLAR**BI-POLAR****BI-POLAR****BI-POLAR**

Primitive mode of
representation

VS

Institutional
mode of
representation

(Kent, 2001)

BI-POLAR

Megaman, 1987

VS



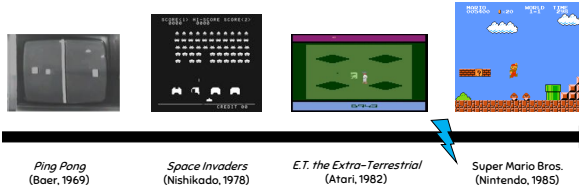
Doom, 1993

EPISTEMIC BREAKS

Radical transformations that push the
medium into new phases of its evolution

(Elsaesser, 2004: 80)

EPISTEMIC BREAKS



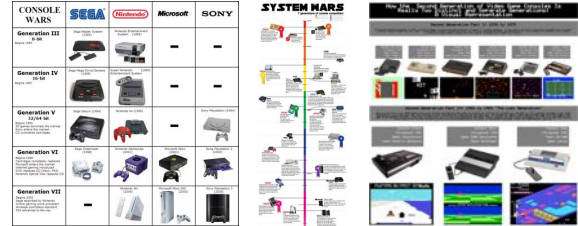
Ping Pong
(Baer, 1969)

Space Invaders
(Nishikado, 1978)

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial
(Atari, 1982)

Super Mario Bros.
(Nintendo, 1985)

EPISTEMIC BREAKS

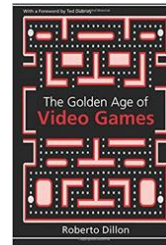


Examples inspired by Therrien and Picard (2015)

EPISTEMIC BREAKS

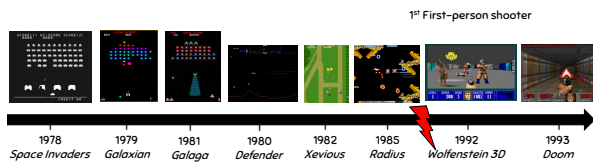


EPISTEMIC BREAKS



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EPISTEMIC BREAKS



Example inspired by Arsenault (2009)

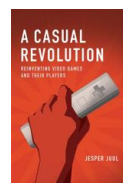
EPISTEMIC BREAKS



EPISTEMIC BREAKS



EPISTEMIC BREAKS



EPISTEMIC BREAKS



CYCLICAL

Revolves around tropes of return, appropriation, remediation, recycling and retrofitting

(Elsaesser, 2004: 79 and 100)

CYCLICAL



CYCLICAL



CYCLICAL



CYCLICAL



Megaman 9 (2008) almost perfectly imitates *Megaman* (1987)

CYCLICAL



Self-reflexivity in *Monkey Island 2*

CYCLICAL



Action games

Action movies

CYCLICAL



Strategy games

Board games

CYCLICAL



RPGs

Fantastic literature

Pen-and-paper role-playing games

GENEALOGICAL APPROACH

- Continuity-with-discontinuity instead of epistemic break
- Networks of vectors that mutually influence each other instead of filiation
- Coexistence, overlap, interference, convergence, synergy, and contingency instead of opposition and cycle

GENEALOGICAL

Genealogy "is opposed to the meta-historical deployment of ideal meanings and open-ended teleologies [...] The forces at play in history do not obey to a destination or a mechanic, but to randomness"

(My translation, Foucault, 2014: 394 and 410)

GENEALOGY

- Concerned by problems "found below the surfaces of our lives" that "feel impenetrable" and whose articulations "require a severe work of thought" and "painstaking patience" (Koopman, 2012)
- Looking for a network of multiple explanations and "mechanisms that are operating in different institutions" (Foucault in Koopman, 2012)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENEALOGY AND ARCHEOLOGY

Archeology describes "isolated slices of time, discontinuous from one to the next", as if sets of practices and events were "static", "motionless", "frozen" in time (Koopman, 2012)

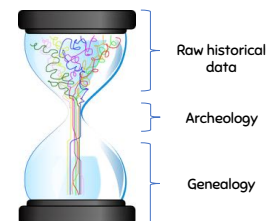
Genealogy is interested in their "fluid becoming", in "historical processes of transition" and in "matrices of transformations" (Koopman, 2012)

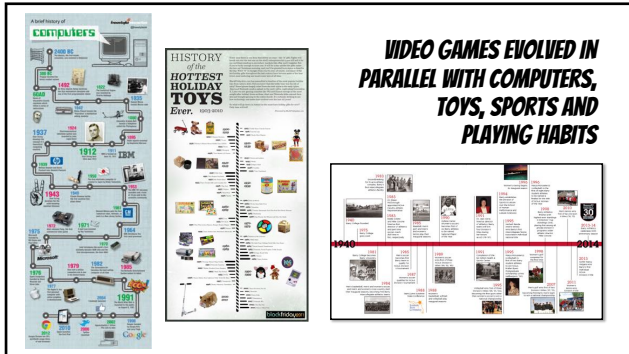
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENEALOGY AND ARCHEOLOGY

"The archaeological dimensions of the analysis made it possible to examine their **FORMS** themselves; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyze their **FORMATION** out of the practices and the modifications undergone by the latter"

(Foucault in Koopman, 2012)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENEALOGY AND ARCHEOLOGY





MULTIPLE VECTORS IN THE HISTORY OF DOMESTIC VIDEO GAMES

- "Process through which the home is turned into a media center"
- Emergence of interactivity that "goes back far before the era of digital technology"
- Influence of the "widespread culture of radio amateurism and electrical tinkering"

(Huhtamo, 2012)

CONJUNCTION OF MULTIPLE FACTORS

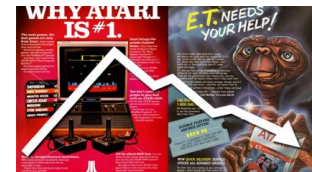
- Saturation of the market
- Limited space in toys stores
- Commercialization of the video recorder

(Herman; Wolf; Donovan)

1983
Crash
of the
game
industry

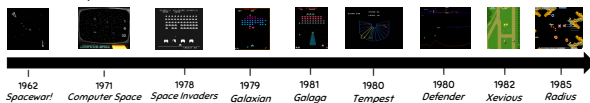
The failure of the game *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* is the consequence of the crash instead of its cause.

(Donovan, 2015: 13, 19)

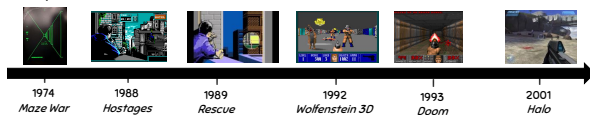


PARALLEL EVOLUTION

Shoot'em ups



First-person shooters



FOCUS ON POWER-KNOWLEDGE INTERPLAY

- Foucault's **ARCHEOLOGIES** focus on the domain of knowledge
- Foucault's **GENEALOGIES** focus on the interplay between power and knowledge

EXCLUSION IN HISTORIOGRAPHIES

"If we ask the question about what has constantly been, through our discourses, the will to knowledge accross so many centuries of our history [...] than it might be something like an **EXCLUSION SYSTEM**"

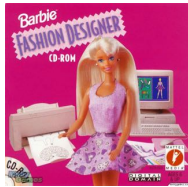
(Foucault, 1970: 18)

GAME HISTORY ANDROCENTRISM

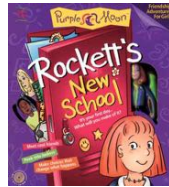
- The history of video game is a "patrilineal chronicle [...] punctuated by sacred litanies of "founding fathers"
- The fact that videogame history is "all about the boys" is the "consequence of a certain mode of historical writing, preservation, memory"

(Nooney, 2012)

OMISSION OF GIRLS' GAME



Pink games



Purple games

OMISSION OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF COMPUTER



Mathematician Ada Lovelace, 1815-1852

OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS



Roberta Williams, co-founder of Sierra-On-Line et and designer of 18 adventure games

OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS



(Wizard and the Princess, 1980)



(King's Quest, 1984)

OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS



(King's Quest IV, 1988)



(Phantasmagoria, 1995)

OMISSION OF WOMEN GAME DESIGNERS



GAME HISTORY ETHNOCENTRISM

Game historians tend to omit platforms and games used outside of United States and Japan.

(Donovan, 2015: 9–10; Wolf, 2014 : 158)

OMISSION OF PLATFORMS PLAYED OUTSIDE USA AND JAPAN



Commodore 64
(1982)



ZX Spectrum
(1982)

OMISSION OF GAMES MADE OUTSIDE USA AND JAPAN



British
shoot'em up



British absurd
platform games

UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT BY STUDYING THE PAST

- Studying history is essential to understanding who, where, and what we are in the present
- Working at intersection of reflection and intervention

(Koopman, 2012)

SEXISM IN THE GAMING CULTURE



CONCLUSION

- History is often romanticized in a way that produce captivating but misleading tales
- The Foucauldian genealogical approach does not provide neat and tidy narrative structures, but better reflects the complexity and contingency of video game history, in addition to problematizing the way history is constructed

THANK YOU!

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