The (not yet) forgotten History of video game practices: a local approach.

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Abstract

This paper stems from an ongoing thesis on the social history of videogame practices in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland, between 1970 and 2010.[i] It aims to offer another understanding of the medium's History through two alternative perspectives.

First, it seeks to observe the video game history not through the dominant discourse of those who produced it, i.e. the industry, but through those who have experienced it. Based on an oral history methodology around previous players' testimonies, this presentation seeks to question how the video game has become part of some people's daily lives. In doing so, the presentation will emphasize the importance of routines, sometimes without passion, practices of video gaming in understanding its historical diffusion. It thus moves away from analyses of fan practices to document more everyday practices.

Secondly, the presentation aims to relativize the global, monolithic, American-centric narratives of videogame histories, which presuppose that video game practice has been identical everywhere and all the time. By zooming in a local context: the Canton of Vaud between 1970 and 2010, it will show how the spread of video games was supported by very local structures: that local café, that teacher who integrated video games, those cousins whose parents were less strict, that arcade that enabled people from the suburbs to get together on Wednesday afternoons.

So, while testimonials often tell us about shared, even hegemonic practices, they also shed light on the personal, even intimate dimension of video gaming. Experiences sometimes forgotten by the participants themselves only to resurface at the time of the interview, and which would otherwise be doomed to oblivion. In conclusion, this presentation will address the role of video game memory for those who saw its emergence, highlighting the limits of such an approach, and showing how today's individual souvenirs can be ossified around some tropes of a collectively constructed memory.

Keywords

Oral History; Practices; Reception; Local History; Play; Space; Time; Switzerland

Introduction

Reception, in media History, is a challenge to tackle. As with other cultural practices, the video game reception, the very moment of *play* is a fleeing experience that does not leave a lot of traces for the historian to follow. The sources left, the material and textual ones like games, machines, boxes, booklets, mirror the perspective of dominant groups with resources to produce and preserve those documents: the industry, the media and scholars. As such, the medium's history is still very linear, moved by technical progress, centred about the Big Games, Great success, great crashes (Krichane, 2020).[ii]

Therefore, I join Jacques Henriot when he said that *we 'should build, not only a history of games, but a history of play, understood as an idea, a mental thing whose name is the vector'* (Henriot, 2024:31, my translation). This perspective aims to understand what *playing* means and how this is a floating, shifting notion. As Vincent Berry states, it aims to "observe play as a "social practice, embedded in different trajectories, networks, contexts, periods and settings" (Berry, 2022:192, my translation). In short, History of reception should pay attention of the 'pragmatic conditions of play' (Genvo, 2013:15, my translation). A good first entry towards this goal is to take inspiration from the play studies ethnographies that try to document and unfold the material, spatial, temporal and social settings of the practice to understand the subjective, intimate experience and meaning of play and tie them to a broader historical context and diachronic transformations.

In this perspective, oral History is a coherent methodology. The aim of oral history is to gather knowledge from living witnesses through semi-directive interviews. As Leavy (2011) and Ritchie (2012) underline, oral History gives access to subaltern, non-written memories and actor's subjective perception of a historical phenomenon. In this approach, History is co-produced between the searcher and the participants. By focusing on micro-histories, individuality, subjectivity, oral history helps us to move away from hegemonic, monolithic memories, at the cost of any generalization. It thus implies a local approach.

Methodology

In this paper, I will present a case study stemming from my research thesis. The case is set from the personal testimonies of various gaming practices from the seventies to the 2000s in the Canton of Vaud, the biggest French-speaking state of Switzerland. This state, quite wide and populated for the country, is covered by urban, rural and mountainous areas and is marked by a great urbanization since the 1950s as the lemanic metropolis around Lausanne developed, hand in hand with the diffusion of consumerism and the industry of leisure.

Focusing on one state, where I live and that I speak the language of, let me be more precise in the recruitment and during my analysis. At the time of the writing of this paper, my results come from fourteen interview, lasting 1 to 1½ hour each, loosely structured around how they experienced videogames during their life. Those interviews gave me access to small local histories, with people from different social backgrounds, males and females, sometimes more, sometimes less engaged with the medium, and they gave insights to how videogames were introduced in their lives, how they used to see them, what games they were in contact with and what "playing video games" would mean in different contexts. The interviews were then critically analysed, coded to see emerging themes.

In this paper, I will present some of the results, focusing on two axes: space and time. These will illustrate how oral history can shed light on the *pragmatic conditions* of play, be it its most practical, material situation.

Results: Space & Time

Space was an ongoing theme during most of the interviews. Indeed, participants use it to contextualize but also specify how they experienced videogames, stressing the symbolic charge various places used to held.

For example, Juan, born in the seventies from a Spanish immigrant family, told me he discovered videogames at the beginning of the eighties, in the Spanish centre of Lausanne, no longer existing. As a toddler, he would go there with his dad, who used to spend time at the bar with the Spanish diaspora, and thus negotiate a few Swiss francs to play the two arcade machines that were there.

This testimony informs us about the spatial diffusion of video games in different, sometimes disappeared, playing places. Not only we can objectively spot this place on a map, but also understand how videogames were, for this person, experienced through his family's trajectory, linked with the history of the Spanish immigration during the second half of the century.

Another example of that is Alexis who told me he would go, as a teenager during the nineties, play, flirt, drink and smoke at a now disappeared arcade room in a smaller town of the state. First, his testimony is full of details on what other activities would surround the very practice of play, but he also informs us of the presence of the very building, who let me access the town's archives who happened to have quite some documents about it, especially on the controversies surrounding its opening.

As an organic way for participants to report their past practices, structuring their narrative around places let me see how this category operated at different scales. At a more regional level, for example, we see how the arrival of arcade machines, especially since the eighties, goes with the development of urban areas and the consumerists practices of young into these places. Even with the short Swiss distances, the difference between *rural* and *urban* practices were saliant, especially when participants say they had this feeling of "gathering in town". On a smaller scale, interviews show the importance of neighbourhood sociability with the arrival of home consoles. Especially the importance of *going to play at friend's house* or *inviting the building's kids* to play video games. At a more intimate level, oral histories tell how the very objects – the computer, the TV console – impacted the domestic spaces, which room they invested, the family dynamics they changed.

For example, during the 80s and 90s, interviews gave insight of how was lived the multiplication of TV sets in households. They inform us of how they were inserted in rooms other than the living room: sleeping rooms, playing rooms, and how they were disconnected from broadcast : from now on, those TVs were not used to watch tv, but *to play,* with the development of brand news usage conflicts.

As said Stefano, who lived in an apartment in a small city during the 90s:

> *'So, the SNES (…) we were three in the same bedroom (…) we had a TV in our bedroom (…) so you can imagine I was the elder bro: it was MY TV. And then we moved the SNES inside our bedroom. (...). I don't even think we had access to TV channels. It was only the… we had a peritel cable and we played SNES!' (My translation)*

Or Samuel, who lived in a house in a village near Lausanne during the 90s :

> *'Eh, it was a playing room, in a way. It was there we used to play with my brother, and there was a console, with other things. There was… There was a TV, but the TV didn't have a remote. We had to push buttons on the side. It really was not a TV to watch TV.' (My translation)*

Of course, from a historical perspective, these places (the city centre, the living room, the sleeping room…) are not universal structures but always embedded in diachronic transformations. The same goes for how *temporal* structures used to influence play practices.

For example, a lot of my interviews were not the first acquisitors of videogames, because, for most of them, they discovered them during the 80s or 90s.[iii] Thus, their first contact and acquisition is often dictated by holidays; Christmas or birthdays, and the family gathering, the meetings with cousins. Acquisition is thus structured in a top-down way; grand cousins showing games to their little cousins; parents buying them for their children.

Interviews also see how the video game practices developed in the gaps within the controlled time, concurring with other activities. As such, preferred times were, “between homework and dinner”, “during the lunch break at work”, “In the morning, before the parents wake up or before they came back from work”. This leads to local specificities. For example, in the Canton de Vaud, since the sixties, there is no school on Saturdays, and then since the eighties, no school on Wednesday afternoons, leading to an asymmetry between the free time of kids and free time of adults.

Space and time are maybe the broadest categories of analysis to situate play practices, but from the interview, we can see how they are structured locally and culturally. We see how there have been structuring *play* and the diffusion of video game culture globally, but also from the point of view of those who received it and made it exist. In this sense, oral history helps us to understand how the situation of play not only structured the practice, but also made it have meaning.

As much as time and space are articulated, and must be understood in the local cultural, technological and economical, contexts, other categories have risen from the interviews, equally articulated: emotions, sociability, class, gender, bodies and gestures, routines and exceptions, memories and nostalgy.

Conclusion : methodological insights

It is a challenge for oral history to gather all these dimensions and to put them into a cohesive analysis. Indeed, as Florence Descamps says

> *‘ [Oral History] clearly set that taped stories from individual testimonies or actors were data, elaborated for the historians and not for history itself, and that the historical critique rules were to be applied as for other documents ’ (Descamps, 2015, p.4, my translation))*

As such, they must be critically analysed, considering the specificities of their production process.

Besides the questions of memory reliability, the main issue stems from the fact that those narratives are produced now about past practices and experiences, always under the input of a researcher.

From my experience, this had several impacts on what kind of discourse was produced and led me to think more critically about the construction of the *memory* of videogames.

First, as the interview situation follows a social script of questions and answers, I have seen many occurrences of participants hesitate but produce an answer *anyway* to keep face. This leads to the second observation: the risk is that they produce an answer around ossified cultural tropes, a hegemonic memory, pre-constructed and nourished by the cultural industry’s imagery.

As Alexis stated:

> *‘I remember this one… On this one… I don’t know. I don’t really remember other games… I must confess... There is certainly… I think it was on this one a game of… kind of a game of Ping Pong. It was called Pong, I think?’ (My translation)*

But the participants were not the only ones who wanted to keep face. As I was reading the transcripts, I realized that, to establish complicity with them, I wanted to make sure I shared their references, their culture. But this led me to stay in an implicit tone, rather than ask details or explication from them.

Finally, I also reconsidered the power of current narrative to frame past experiences with how participants took care to show me how they know *now* what is or is not a legitimate practice. For example, there were many to tell me about *addiction* or *violence* in terms that were, I suppose, not those of the children they were but were those of frame mediatized since the 90's and 2000s.

This highlights that creating an*other* History of videogames is not just an issue of exploring the reception, but also of putting the *memory* of videogame culture under critical scrutiny.

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Notes

[i] The paper was presented during the Video Game Culture 2024 conference, as well as the ' Traces et approches des usages dans la culture populaire et médiatique 1880-2020 ' conference in Montréal, May 2024

[ii] Moreover, the very ordinary practices are difficult to study. Even intimate sources such as ego-documents will tend to show what I call "epic" play, understood as "worthy of telling" stories. As an illustration, I found these pictures in my familial album. In 1986 or so, my older brother got Donkey Kong 3 and a series of pictures were taken. Almost all are portraits of my grandparents playing : only one shows the actual game. What is interesting is, in my sense, not much what is shown (my grandparents playing) but the reason why the picture was taken : an incongruity, a broken norm, worthy of recalling. As such, these photos, as intimate they might be, tell an epic tale of history of play.

[iii] Recruiting people having played during the 70s and early 80s is quite difficult. They are harder to contact and less prone to express their practices as ' video games '.