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Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives



Keri Duncan Valentine and Lucas John Jensen



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With complex stories and stunning visuals eliciting intense emotional responses, coupled with opportunities for self-expression and problem solving, video games are a powerful medium to foster empathy, critical thinking, and creativity in players. As these games grow in popularity, ambition, and technological prowess, they become a legitimate art form, shedding old attitudes and misconceptions along the way.

Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives asks whether videogames have the power to transform a player and his or her beliefs from a sociopolitical perspective. Unlike traditional forms of storytelling, videogames allow users to immerse themselves in new worlds, situations, and politics. This publication surveys the landscape of videogames and analyzes the emergent gaming that shifts the definition and cultural effects of videogames. This book is a valuable resource to game designers and developers, sociologists, students of gaming, and researchers in relevant fields.

Topics Covered:

- Creativity in Video Games
- Critical Theory in Games
- E-Sports
- Experimental Video Games
- Game Customization
- Game Mechanics
- LGBT Gaming Issues
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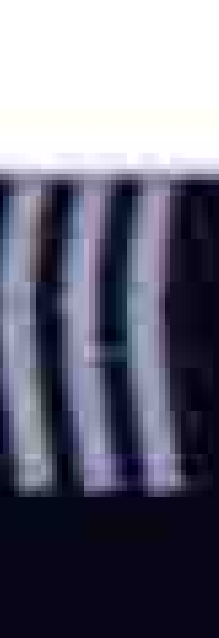
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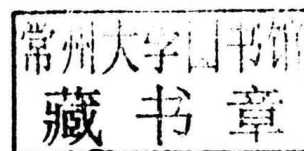
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Foreword

Introduction to the Evolution of Gaming

Writing an introduction to the “evolution” of games (videogames, non-digital games or otherwise) feels daunting. Actually, it is probably that I’m simply being difficult about it. As an anthropologist of game development, game developer and a player of games, I feel like I have a sense of their evolutionary flows. Yet my training comes from the strange interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies, which, perhaps predictably, means that my first response isn’t, “Indeed... Games have changed,” but rather, “What is evolution anyway? Have games evolved?” Thus, I apologize in advance for what comes next.

I suspect that if I were to ask an Executive Producer at Electronic Arts, Nintendo or Sony if games have evolved, they would likely answer in a kind of resounding, “Yes, of course!” Evolution appeals to a kind of market-based logic that dominates the mainstream “triple-A” or “AAA” game industry. Market logics plug directly into the narrative of “natural selection” or that “the strong survive,” which should not be equated to evolution by any means, though it is often how it is imagined. Shifts in computational power and the rise of technologies also, sort of, lend themselves to this kind of grand evolutionary narrative. Darwinism, as it is frequently argued, fits well into broader social and cultural conceptions of meritocracy and might makes right. Comfortable narratives of progress and infinite growth should probably make anyone nervous.

At this precise moment, it is that mainstream industry that is undergoing seismic tectonic shifts. I frequently tell students that the shifts we are seeing in the game industry, if we can even consider such a monolithic concept to even exist, parallel those of 1984-5. To which, I pose the question, what kind of evolution are we witnessing in that case? What species will emerge from this particular epoch? Because, the reality is that evolution is much more complicated than the overly simplified vision of it as a kind of capitalist market economy for DNA or a “survival of the fittest.” Rather, something far more interesting is going on when we advance the idea that games have evolved and that the implications of those shifts have had broad social, cultural and political ramifications.

This is a perspective that others and I have advanced on numerous occasions: That games and the craft of game development have dramatic implications for society, culture and our political economic systems. I’ve gone so far as to say that games in/as/of/through culture ought to be how we understand this particular cultural form (Malaby, 2009; O’Donnell, 2014). So, I’ve clearly drunk the Kool-Aid that forms the foundation of many of the entries contained herein. But, what if we take the metaphor of evolution seriously in the context of this collected volume? Not the Darwinism as Market Capitalism metaphor, but rather a reading of evolution as one also rooted in epigenetics through which a variety of factors may come to influence the evolutionary traits passed down over the years.

I once quipped that evolution makes a really boring game mechanic, because like diffusion and all sorts of other natural processes, it just kind of happens. And the idea that there is a kind of guiding hand for evolution lands us quickly in the hands of people arguing for the teaching of “intelligent” design. Yet, we clearly do shape and are shaped by our own activities when you look at the current state of evolution. Monsanto is in the business of intelligent design. High-fructose corn syrup and the human (at least the American) body demands that we face the fact that we are manipulating these systems in ways we don’t fully understand. To which I can then ask, what kind of monsters are we making (O’Donnell, 2015)?

Now, to be clear, I’m not sailing down an epigenetic stream where thoughts can cure cancer, but rather that genetic regulation and expression are complex factors subject to a wide array of factors. It allows us to think, in particular, about things like toxicology and the ways in which genetics, and thus evolution, have become imbricated by a complex heritage that implicates human activity and non-human activity in the future of evolutionary processes.

I don’t know if I’d go so far as to call games a kind of “companion species,” but that might be a reasonable starting point for thinking through from an evolutionary perspective where games have come from and where they are going. Not unlike dogs, games serve as a kind of “obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship” with humanity (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Games are part of us as much as our companion species, and while not biological in the same sense, they’ve kind of always been with us along the way and mutated, shifted, moved, grown and evolved along side us. And they have returned the favor, in all likelihood manipulating us as well.

In many ways, the metaphor works well for the evolution of games. Much like dog breeds, particular kinds of games have enjoyed more or less care over time. We have deliberately cultivated particular traits and neglected others. Some breeds have thrived and others have suffered under the less watchful eyes of their breeders. Mutts, mongrels, half-breeds and hybrid breeds have emerged for a variety of reasons. Not unlike dogs, games have served in both war and peace. They both reflect and reflect back on broader social and cultural shifts.

Which is why exploring the co-evolution of games makes particular sense at this moment in their (our) history (histories). Which is why asking questions about what are games is important. Our definition of what counts as a game or videogame is of crucial import. Calling attention to particularly important, compelling, notable or infamous games provides a compelling story for how we might want to think about our co-evolutionary existence with these things that are both simultaneously frivolous and incredibly meaningful.

Games implicate us in this co-evolutionary moment. As Monforton notes in this volume, “There are no observers here.” Well, there are, but they too are implicated in this whole system. Twitch.tv has made what was always the case even more abundantly clear. We are playing even when we are observing. Certainly as someone who teaches at a “Division I” sports university, I can attest to the role that a spectator plays when they too step into the magic circles called “stadiums” where games like Basketball, Football (of the American variety) and Hockey are played. And yet, I can also recall quite fondly times spent watching my cousin play *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* on his Super Nintendo Entertainment System. I was the keeper of the strategy guide as he played along.

It also makes the role of Game Studies, as a field, if we can imagine that such a unified field exists, all the more critical. If games are evolving along with us, then they are a thing worth studying in their own right. Not simply because they can be “games for change” or “serious games” or “games for health.”

Games are important. Part of the evolution of games is understanding them as important in their own right. Indeed, we can look to them for sites where formal or informal learning occurs, but that isn't why they're important. Games may be sites where we can understand how "effects" of games occur, but that isn't why they're important. They're important because they simultaneously mean something and mean nothing at all. The meaningful and meaninglessness of them intertwines in ways that make them special.

So too have games had strange entanglements with how we understand femininity and masculinity. The embodied nature of games and play often cannot be avoided. Even in "virtual" spaces we embody avatars that embody us, or not. This may even be more intense when we extend our understandings of games to sports. One might even argue that is one reason why scholars studying games have been recalcitrant in their pursuit of studying sports games. It is hard to avoid when videogames begin to become more sports-like. Competition is fierce in sports and bodies matter in ways that complicate our understanding of them, and yet games, precisely by their designed character, mean that often times we make uncomfortable choices about what counts and what doesn't.

But none of this is really new. It has been a part of the human experience all along. Games have moved with us and changed with the times. We can't say that only the text of a game matters, or that only players matter or that only the developers matter. In this complicated system all of the components matter. As researchers of games (or makers of games or those studying creators of games) we make decisions about which aspects of the system we examine, yet, all matter simultaneously. So, we continue to muddle through our study of them and of ourselves. Games both help and hinder our understanding of the world. They simultaneously over-complicate and simplify things. That is what makes them interesting.

While some might argue that games have "simply" changed to mirror the political-economic moment of the times, I think that neglects the kinship ties that games have with us and with themselves. They change how we think about a great many things. Education is one particularly salient more or less playful system that games have forced us to think quite differently about. I cannot help but look at the DNA (aka "structure") of the "big bad game industry" in 2008 and its subsequent mutations through 2014 implicated in what eventually became #GAMERGATE on Twitter (and in real life) (Chess & Shaw, 2015). The shifting structure of games and our relationship with them was under shift and change. Little wonder there were those who once defined and defended one "breed" over another would find discomfort in the "destruction" of a particular species. When what was ultimately happening was that the ecosystem was diversifying. But tell that to the species that feels under threat.

Games have evolved not because we've brought them along with us. Games have evolved because they've changed us as much as we've changed them. This volume seeks to take very seriously (or not, because that's part of the point) the broader social, political, economic, educational, fun, serious, silly, salient, designed, sad or otherwise role that games have in our current moment. This isn't a sign that games have "come of age," but rather that we, collectively, have come of age to understand the role that these systems have in our broader human, collective journey.

The window at the end of the hallway in which my office is located looks out on what I often refer to as, "the church of football." I transitioned from being a Georgia Bulldog to being a Michigan State Spartan in recent years, but both stadiums definitely border on religious. Think about how the game of football has changed even in recent history. College ball and "professional" ball are certainly related breeds, but also different in not unimportant ways. College ball is as much a professional endeavor for those that pursue it. I sat and watched this last year a Spartan football game up in the "nosebleed" seats

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and watched as three young athletes were micro-profiled on giant screens that also informed me that Mountain Dew was now the “official” beverage of the Spartan Nation. These screens informed me as to which videogames were these athletes favorite growing up: *The Legend of Zelda* (and I can only surmise that this was actually *Ocarina of Time* but I’ll not split hairs), *Super Mario Kart* and *Golden Eye 007*. Clearly we have a Nintendo 64 generation on our hands. But this tells us something about games. They mean things to us.

This is why we study the evolution of games.

Casey O’Donnell

Michigan State University, USA

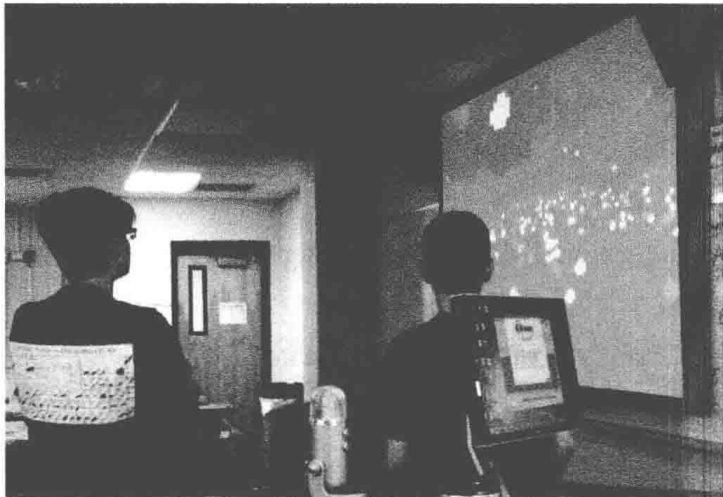
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Preface

THE TIME OUR KIDS CHEERED PROTEUS AND OTHER STORIES

It's beautiful - look at that! It's an asteroid belt. And the moon! Look at the shooting stars!



That was Matthew (names have been changed to protect the innocent), a cherubic young camper/game designer at a video game design-based summer youth program run by this book's editors. And he was not alone in his fascination with the strange 8-bit-gone-2D/3D world projected in front of the classroom, pastel colors flickering across his eyes. A group of mostly young boys, ages 11-17, yelled—in a complete abdication of the “inside voice” concept—directions at the poor, befuddled camper stuck guiding the first-person character via the mouse and keyboard controls.

Together, the class was playing *Proteus* (Key & Kanaga, 2013), a video game so experimental that its developer once had to take to the company blog to defend its very status as a game (Key, 2013). To describe *Proteus* is difficult; the player explores a randomly generated island with flat, forward-facing 2D objects that emit tones, pulses, and musical swells. It would be a dramatic understatement to call *Proteus*'s narrative flow non-traditional. The game has no dialogue, no text beyond the menus, and no buttons with which to interact. The player advances the “story” by exploring this pixelated hybrid 2D/3D landscape that one camper described to us as “Atari 3D.” The objects in *Proteus* look flat, chunky, and pixelated, all rendered in a smooth high-definition, first-person environment where objects always face forward.

Chase the frog...follow the wisp. Wait, you can crouch. How did you do that?

Preface

In the middle! In the middle! See all the gravestones? Go down! Look, they're (the wisps) going that way!

But the crystal light – they might lead you to possible death. You probably become one of the gravestones.

They're going in all directions! Where are they going? Go that way! Go that way! They're moving that direction – follow them!

Of course, games—even single-player video games—can be powerful participatory and shared experiences. Much like the author of the book's foreword, Casey O'Donnell, we grew up playing ostensible single-player games like *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986b), the *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986a), and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) as multiplayer participatory experiences, passing Nintendo Entertainment System controllers back and forth in a collaborative effort to defeat the games. As O'Donnell and others throughout this book note, games serve as a powerful social connector. One needs to look no further than the flourishing world of e-sports and video game streaming to witness the boundaries between video game playing and spectatorship collapsing.

E-sports and the communities that grow around video games provide the historical context for two of the chapters in this book. Chapter 8 examines the use of gendered, homophobic, and sexually violent insults in competitive gaming online communities before the arrival of professional e-sports. The authors of Chapter 11 argue that e-sports and the live-streaming of video games might create “affinity spaces” for cognitive apprenticeship, where novices learn from experts through communities built around each game's live stream.

We found a house! Forget the crystals, people! See if you can go inside. Oh, there's a door! See if you can go inside. No, you can't. Touch it. Follow the fairies (back to the fairies). They're everywhere. They froze. They're frozen. Oh, they're crowding around that area. Okay, they're moving! All the fairies – did you just get trapped? Turn around – it's right there – touch it! We're at the edge! So the farther away you go from that...Show him the fairy thingy – show him the gravestone circle. There's the house again. Go to the house and see if the leaves don't fall.

What makes this experience even more odd is that *Proteus* is a “de facto” music game: each pixelated frog, tree, or statue gives off a tone, so the randomly generated island is one giant ambient music generator. And yet the kids were cheering *Proteus* with the sound off because the speakers in the room were malfunctioning. Here is *Proteus*, one of the most infamous of a group of experimental games often tagged with the pejorative “walking simulator,” games where exploration and experiencing the game world and/or narrative—and, to be sure, *Proteus*'s narrative is quite opaque—is more important than the player scoring points or killing the bad guy or rescuing the princess. Because of *Proteus*' experimental art style and dearth of combat, dialogue, or goals, it made an unorthodox candidate for this shared, participatory experience. *Proteus* is a video game so inscrutable that academic and designer Ian Bogost (2013) approached this notorious “not a game” from three different “artisanal” angles in one review. For him, a game so “unusual”—or perhaps any video game—necessitates dissection using multiple critical lenses, much like a movie might be deconstructed on more than one level, from aesthetic and technical concerns like cinematography or screenwriting, to its symbolism or implicit political message.

Its unique approach to narrative and aesthetics has put *Proteus* at the forefront of debates about what makes a video game a “video game” and whether some video games are even games at all (Key,

2013). These young campers cheering *Proteus* like a spectator sport are not regular avant garde game enthusiasts. Their tastes, while diverse, still adhere to the most popular game series of the day: *Call of Duty*; *Minecraft*; *Smash Brothers*; *Minecraft*; *Grand Theft Auto*; *Minecraft*; *Pokémon*; and *Minecraft*. Boundary-pushing genre and indie games like *Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007), and *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) are popular, but rarely do these campers' tastes veer into more experimental games where the notion of "winning" is subsumed by other concerns like storytelling or atmosphere. In *Proteus*' case, we observed its unusual aesthetic, with its "flat" 3D and dripping 8-bit trees, engaging the campers the most. These aesthetics stood in stark contrast to the sepia-toned shooters that occupied so much of their mental real estate.

Video games have matured and are offering trailblazing, challenging, and alternative perspectives and points-of-view, through idiosyncratic combinations of the social, interactive, audio, spatial, and visual aspects of video games. Chapter 1 surveys the new video game landscape and explores how these new experiences are changing our traditional notions of what a game can or should be. The independent game sphere precipitated much of this challenge to dominant industry paradigms, by introducing these novel and provocative aesthetics and player perspectives. Chapter 15 compares this to the classic hardcore, punk, DIY, and indie movements of the 80s and 90s and how those values are represented in the perspectival shifting game mechanics of games like *Monument Valley* (Ustwo, 2014), *Fez* (Polytron Corporation, 2012), and *Proteus*. Indie games *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013) and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, create much of their tension by subverting player agency. The player in *Dear Esther* canvasses a lonely randomly generated island, much like *Proteus*, in search of a narrative doled out in pieces out of the player's control. In *Outlast*, discussed at length in Chapter 3, the player uses a video camera to document the gruesome horrors at an insane asylum run amuck. The player-as-video camera serves as an effective and scary narrative hook as well as a proxy embodiment of the surveillance state.

GAMING WITHOUT GOALS: WALL OF MINECRAFT



How was your weekend, Colin?

Pretty good, I guess. I was super depressed and shaky, but then I realized I just needed to play some Minecraft.

This actual exchange with a student decked out in a *Minecraft* hoodie and t-shirt is the stuff of parental nightmares, a confirmation of all the alarmist news stories about video game addiction and gamers dying from dehydration in Internet cafes. Sometimes it feels like physical force is necessary to separate children (and some adults) from the infinite Lego sandbox that is *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), the video game phenomenon that fetched billions of dollars from Microsoft. Some play and game theorists have suggested that there are four types of play: play for progress; play for power; play for fantasy; and play for self (Pellegrini, 1995; Rieber, 1996; Sutton-Smith, 2009). Others have said that gamers can be killers, explorers, achievers, or socializers (Bartle, 1996). We have observed all of these behaviors among kids playing *Minecraft*, so perhaps the possibility space it creates scratches the idiosyncratic needs of its different players.

We witnessed this phenomenon ourselves, manifested in the Wall of *Minecraft*, six children who played nonstop *Minecraft* on a row of computers against a wall, impervious to outside influence and distractions. They swapped between various mods—player-created modifications to the game’s core systems—and servers that housed different universes to explore, fluent not just in *Minecraft*’s internal rules, but also in the “meta”-game of mods, servers, YouTube *Minecraft* celebrities, and more. Did we mention that kids today like *Minecraft*? One of us jokingly referred to *Minecraft* as “The Great Equalizer”—Southern children from different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and religions—all playing games for different reasons and in different ways, united under the banner of this blocky randomly-generated playground. A few of the Minecrafters enjoyed the crafting elements, discovering new tools and blocks. Others focus on the building mechanic itself. Another just liked to explore and view everyone else’s creations. A couple were determined to beat the EnderDragon, the putative goal of *Minecraft*. One young girl approached *Minecraft* with the ethics of Sun Tzu, treating a non-competitive game as a competition, stealing or sabotaging everyone else’s stuff when they were not looking.

Within the Wall of *Minecraft* alone, we had kids playing for all of the reasons listed above, to be killers and explorers, to play for progress and fantasy, and to play for self, as Colin recounted. We have often debated as to whether the kids’ obsession with this world of never-ending Legos was a “good thing,” in part because we wanted them to “go outside,” so to speak, and experience new games and worlds beyond *Minecraft*. But, perhaps like all debates about whether something was a “good thing” or not, from *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) to *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design, 1997) before them, this is the wrong debate, and we should look to how a game like *Minecraft* satisfies so many needs of such a large, diverse group of players, young and old alike. Just like the Swedish-developed *Minecraft* can appeal to a diverse group of children in the United States, Chapter 17 holds up a mirror to the cultural dimensions of games and game design while examining video games’ increasing global influence. Similarly, Chapter 18 considers the importance of public games across the world, emphasizing the global cultural importance of community play that is not always connected to a game controller or a screen. Even with its technological trappings, *Minecraft* increasingly resembles as much a community as a game, from the playground conversations and layers of meta-content around it, the numerous servers and mods, to the live-streaming of *Minecraft* on Twitch and YouTube. One can even find specialized *Minecraft* parkour videos on YouTube.

EXPLORING FLATLAND: JUXTAPOSING CASES AS ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

One of the editors is a former middle school mathematics teacher whose most pivotal moment was problematizing space and perspective with 5th – 8th graders, incited by the short film *Flatland: The Movie* (Caplan, Wallace, Travis, & Johnson, 2007). “Is there a fourth dimension?” is the typical initial question this film inspires, following the rotating 4-dimensional cube (aka, tesseract, hypercube) expanded during the last scene. Building on this experience, she designed a hypermedia site (<https://spaceandperspective.com>) to support eighth grade learners investigation of cases as alternative perspective (Valentine & Kopcha, in press). One set of cases focused on video games like *Asteroids* (Atari Inc., 1979), *Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007), and *Super Paper Mario* (Intelligent Systems, 2007). These video game cases became “geometric gifts” to support learners problematization of geometric shape and the dimensional qualities of these worlds. Alistar, one of the students, recounted this time as one where he found his gamer identity shifting:

Before, I just liked games that were big, you know were fun, interesting — I didn’t really care if they did anything new. And with indie games, a lot of them with their art styles and their mechanics like Fez kind feel like they’re almost taken from like different perspectives in space where every game feels different in that regard.

A typical console, blockbuster-loving gamer became mesmerized by games that messed with space and perspective, especially *Fez* (Polytron Corporation, 2012). However, he didn’t just play *Fez* for enjoyment, he wanted to re-skin *Fez* and tell the story of *Flatland* – a story about A. Square, a 4-sided polygon who lives on a plane. For Alistar, there were many parallels between A. Square’s visit to the third dimension and Gomez’s, the main character in *Fez*, ability to rotate his two-dimensional world in order to traverse the landscape.

So when I first bought Fez—this was right after the Space and Perspective class—I was interested and I had heard of this game before and I bought it. I played through the entire game and I thought it was great. Then I came across this guy on YouTube who had taken another game—like a space fighting game and made a modification where he actually converted the entire game and redesigned all the skins for everything—made all the different weapons for everything. And he made it a Star Wars game, which was kind of interesting. So what I’ve been trying to do is redesign Fez to kind of pretty much be Flatland.

Alistar is now in high school, taking classes in programming and video editing—anything that he sees helping him accomplish his goal to mod *Fez*. Not only is Alistar attune to the ability of games to mess with perspective, or create impossible perspectives, he is motivated by a desire to integrate the 1884 satire of *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (Abbott, 1991) into an experience that only video games can accomplish. More about Alistar’s experience is explicated in Chapter 15.