Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames

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https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/22455

REVIEW OF PLAYBACK A GENEALOGY OF 1980S BRITISH VIDEOGAMES

Playback A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames
by Alex Wade
Bloomsbury Academic, NY, NY, 2016
 192 pp. Trade, £88.00; eBook, £84.99
 ISBN: 9781628924893.

Reviewed by:
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July 2017

Videogames have a problem--not the kind brought up as part of a moral panic--rather one where the understanding of its own history is distorted by a North American account (even with Japan's influence upon the medium). For many currently involved with videogames in some capacity, the calendar seems to start at 1983 after the North American videogame market crash. There is, of course, a tacit recognition of what existed prior to the crash, but this is viewed upon as a sort of "pre-history"; one that does not fit with the strict linear-chronology that has helped define the way the medium has been understood since.

In Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames, Alex Wade attempts to provide an alternative to an approach that he considers having overlooked the less evident influences of videogames: from the United Kingdom and internationally. Wade, largely, succeeds in this aim, but to an extent, less than the title of the book would lead to suggest. Yet, the book is the better for it, for it is not meant to be a history of British videogames, nor is it solely focused on the 1980s. If it were, it would be hypocritical, for then it would be providing the very linear-chronology that he is arguing against. Furthermore, whilst the focus is on the United Kingdom, it is not exclusively so, as the videogames medium is a truly global one, albeit with centres of influence.

The relationship between videogames and technology is a running theme throughout, and one that Wade acknowledges has an intricate dichotomy. The model of supersession and obsolescence is at the core of the industry, but it is done so on the manufacturer's terms and not purely in response to technological advancement. Wade states that they give the appearance of innovating, but "only in the context of the past". Implying that a new videogame console is not necessarily the best it can be, merely that is better than the previous one, and that the previous console is now unable to play newly developed

videogames. It is because of this process of obsolescence that has resulted in hardware platforms that "refuse to die" despite being replaced by superior technology and game design, which James Newman (2012 p. 34) argues defies "the logic of upgrade".

There is a fitting example that highlights the difficulty that the videogames medium faces in terms of archival, as well as engaging with and understanding its past. Wade posits that "kids on the bus are aware of Sega's existence as a hardware manufacturer [Sega stopped manufacturing videogame consoles in 2001 and became a third-party publisher/developer], but unsure as to why the definitive version of Sega Rally runs on a console that wasn't built for 3D." Emulation might enable videogames of the past to run on newer hardware. But despite efforts to make this an easier process, it remains uneven, and often the videogames do not function in the same way as they would on the original hardware. With this distinction between awareness of the medium's past and first-hand knowledge results in Game Studies adopting it is equivalent to Latin: serving the purpose of describing events of the past but struggling to translate to the current time.

Equally Game and Film Studies are influenced by their relationship to older, more "mature," media forms that are deemed to inherently carry greater critical weight; resulting in a hauntology. This hauntology could also be seen to exist within the videogames medium itself. Wade expediently notes that "today's 'hardcore' gamers are able to express their dissatisfaction with the current state of the industry on NeoGaf [an online videogame forum] and then crowdfund a new game which fits with their profile of what a game should be and how it should play." Recently there have been notable examples of videogame releases that were the result of crowdfunding campaigns based on nostalgic desires for past franchises. Upon delivery of said promised game, however, are videogames present in the wrong time. Suddenly gamers discovered that gameplay mechanics they were so fond of from the past were no longer relevant or enjoyable. These are no simulacrum either, for they are better games, running on new more powerful hardware with higher fidelity graphics, except dragging up the past does not work nor do "hardcore gamers" actually know what it is they want.

One such nostalgic throwback has been the 3D platformer, relevant in this instance due to its ties to British developer Rare (formerly known as RareWare). During the 1990s Rare was one of the British firms that Japanese console platform manufacturers, such as Nintendo and Sony, went to for their coding expertise. The attractiveness of Britain's videogame developers during the 1990s is a result of a shift in technological habitus that took place in the country during the 1980s. As during that decade computers moved into the homes of British families and from there into the bedrooms of the next generation of coders. It is this distinction where the heart of the book lies. For it highlights the source of Britain's relationship with videogames, but it also suggests how the medium ultimately went in the direction that it did. Earlier home consoles were a family device, placed next to the TV in the living room/lounge; different familial members would play against one another in simplistic competitive games. But, with the move into bedrooms, and more often boys' bedrooms, had the unfortunate counter effect of turning videogames into a more individualistic pursuit as well as instilling the gender separation and negative stereotypes that haunt the medium to this day. Nintendo did attempt to revive the notion of the whole family playing together as part of its strategy surrounding its Wii console but did not find lasting success and has since adopted a more general "gamer" approach seen by Sony and Microsoft once again.

The move into bedrooms, of course, was not universal, as consoles remained next to the communal TV in many households, but the relationship with videogames in the UK was not the same as found in Japan or even North America. Videogame arcade units were found across the United States, and the country also contained a large quantity of

dedicated arcade venues. The same was not the case with the UK. There might have been arcade units dotted across the country, but they were rarely confined to a dedicated space. Instead, they were guests within wider establishments, typically where food was served and videogames provided a distraction before the food arrived. Although that was not the sole clientele as countless people would go to these establishments with the primary intention to play it and maybe get a beverage, as Wade identifies from one of the multiple interviews that populate the latter half of the book. Eating establishments were not the only place to find arcade units. One of the more common locations were found alongside beaches throughout British seaside towns, such as Southend-on-Sea and Newquay. Often these towns would provide the closest equivalent to the arcades found in the US, but these primarily served the purpose of acquiring more money from tourists visiting the town, rather than providing the locals with the latest games. Therefore, the memory of British videogame players does not place arcade games with the same prestige as those across the pond. Their memories are instead entwined with that of the holiday they were on, the people they were with, and how the weather was. That does not devalue the videogames played, but they are interacted with in a very different context; therefore, the British habitus towards videogames has an inherently different genealogy.

Towards the end of the book Wade starts to more directly address the impact of British politics upon videogames from the country. In doing so he highlights the role of satire in the medium. This is not purely in the sense of humour – although it can be a notable feature – but via exaggerated real-world circumstances through the videogames medium to highlight and address the problems that exist. Wade suggests a dissatisfaction with the lack of significant satire found within the medium as it has aged. Noting that 1984s Seaside Special was a clear piece of interactive media that used the nature of videogames as a means for its developer to demonstrate their objections to Margaret Thatcher's Tory government in which the game provided players with the opportunity to "defeat" Thatcher herself and thereby completing the game. Satire has by no means disappeared from contemporary videogames, and it is the British developed Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series (notably Rockstar North's Grand Theft Auto V (2013)) that has been providing a critique of American culture and Western capitalism. Wade notes GTA as challenging the status quo, but also asks why more videogames are not doing so? GTA is not the only videogame series to provide satire, but Wade only lists a couple of overt examples. There is presently cutting commentary on contemporary society appearing in the medium such as in Nier: Automata (2017) or of the ramifications of foreign intervention as witnessed in Spec Ops: The Line (2012), both of which also provide critique of the videogames medium be it genre tropes or the very complicity of player interaction. Wade, however, is not wrong in calling for more satire, as the videogames medium can do more, but it is the less overt games that are doing so in more interesting ways that potentially will provide a longer lasting commentary.

Throughout the book, Wade sporadically mentions the appalling abuses that took place in the UK during the 1980s (and date back further) that have been recently examined with many either prosecuted or under investigation. Whilst these events should not be ignored, their presence in this book always seemed out of place; the connection to the videogames of the time and into today never became clear. The connection between politics and serious real-world events is certainly warranted, which Wade succeeds with briefly elsewhere in the book. But aside from helping to portray the 1980s as one example of a poor time in recent British history and questioning how "individuals could avert their gazes" to these events, fails to address how this can be understood today. If there is a conceptual criticism to be acknowledged with this book, it would be this. Whether this was intended to play a bigger role in the book is not clear, but if it were, then that could explain its repeated mentions throughout.

Through Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames Alex Wade attempts to show that there can be a genealogical approach to videogames, one that does not have to specify a time and place as its position, instead, as part of a "continuum between past, present, and future." Ironically, at times, the book forgets that the focus is seemingly on 1980s videogames, as significant attention is given to videogames from outside of the UK and from different decades. Yet this does strengthen the book, as the examples are given the space to support the argument at that given time, instead of having to be cut short due to its geographical and chronological otherness. The key to this book is supporting a genealogy of videogames as a whole, with Britain's role in videogames providing a backbone to reign in the narrative journey. Videogames are not exclusive to a single country, hemisphere, or epoch. Wade might have set out to provide a greater insight into the relevance of British videogames but has instead succeeded at calling for a spatially diverse investigation of videogames, and that time is now.

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