Knowing the Past: Game Education Needs Game History

Clara Fernández-Vara
Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab

Jesper Juul
New York University Game Center

Noah Wardrip-Fruin
University of California, Santa Cruz
WHICH GAME HISTORY?
Game history does not have to be digital
Digital Game History
WHAT?
North American Videogame History
Brief History of European videogames in the 80s
Dominated by home computers
Bedroom developers
The Golden Age of Spanish Videogames
Know History to Understand the Present
Influence on Current Developers
There are different game histories depending on where you come from
ESSENTIAL GAMES
“Essential Games” FTW!
“Essential Games” FTW! WTF?

Intro to Literature ≠

Intro to Film ≠

You cannot cover the *essential games* — give up!

We need a different approach to game history: *essential viewpoints*
Essential Viewpoint: Diachronic

Games influence each other

Look at games through time, not as individual masterworks

Look at games in culture, not in isolation
Essential Viewpoint: Synchronic
NO GAME NATIVES
Kids Students know all about games!

- 97% of 12-17 year olds play games!
- Digital Natives!
- So easy to teach!
No. Game Natives

- Majority of students play digital games.

- But: Their game knowledge is local, particular to their time and interests.
The students have never even tried to read *The Iliad*!
And if they did, they found it “boring”.

What is the world coming to?!?!
The students have never even tried to read *The Iliad*! And if they did, they found it “boring”.

What is the world coming to?!!
Teach.
Game.
History.
GAMES 101
Case study: Games 101 Class

NYU Game Center

- Situated in Tisch School of the Arts, New York University
- Games as a cultural form and game design as creative practice.
- Undergraduate minor with students from across NYU and NYU-Poly.
- 2-year MFA program launching fall 2012.
Problems when Teaching

- Historical Game Studies discussions refer to historical games.
- Game Design relies on a palette of solutions in earlier games.
- Studio classes & experimental design challenging with little knowledge of past experiments & roads not taken.
GAMES 101

What every well educated person should know about games.

Game 101 looks at the history of games - from ancient board games and sports to modern day computer and video games. Each week you will play, analyze, and discuss abstract and intelligent games. By the end of the semester you will have a broad understanding of the central ideas and canonical works of this important cultural field.

NYU GAME CENTER
The Games 101 course

- 60 students
- Co-taught by game center faculty and adjuncts
- Weekly quiz
  - Years, dates!
- Weekly 500-word report on one of three games
  - Must play game at least three hours. (Ties into grading.)

http://gamecenter.nyu.edu/academics/courses
Selection

Not a *canon*, but canonical themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roots</strong></td>
<td>Chess, Go, Backgammon, Mancala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sports</strong></td>
<td>Football (Soccer), Tennis, Basketball</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
<td>Adventure (Atari 2600), Zork, The Secret of Monkey Island</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Action &amp; Platformers</strong></td>
<td>Space Invaders, Super Mario Bros, Gears of War</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Modern Board &amp; Card Games</strong></td>
<td>Scrabble, Poker, Settlers of Catan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fighting</strong></td>
<td>Street Fighter II, Virtua Fighter 4, Super Smash Bros, Melee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action-Adventure</strong></td>
<td>Grand Theft Auto IV (any platform), Metal Gear Solid 4, Uncharted 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RPGs and Midterm</strong></td>
<td>Dungeons and Dragons, Dragon Quest V, World of Warcraft</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CCGs &amp; Simulations</strong></td>
<td>Magic: The Gathering, Sim City, NetHack</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FPS</strong></td>
<td>Doom, Half-Life, CounterStrike, Halo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td>Advance Wars, Civilization V, Starcraft 2, DOTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Casual/Social</strong></td>
<td>Bejeweled, Wii Sports, Farmville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indie/Experimental</strong></td>
<td>Seiklus, Minecraft, Passage</td>
</tr>
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Game Library

- Open to NYU students Mon-Fri 2-8PM.
- 14 systems, 1000 games.
- Coordination between classes and librarians.
- Priority to students taking classes.
Take the quiz!

Who among the following is a key person in the development of this game:

- Yoichi Yamada
- Walter Camp
- James Naismith
- Rinus Michel
Take the quiz!

What year was this game released?

- 1988
- 1994
- 1998
- 2001

http://gamecenter.nyu.edu/2012/02/games-101-practice-exam
Critical Play Reports

**Critical Play Report - Week 2**
Choose one of the following topics for your paper. Keep the paper to 500 words (plus or minus 10 words.)

**Topics:**

**Adventure:** Complete levels 1, 2, and 3 of Adventure for the Atari 2600. How does the game structure change from level to level? What aspects of the space, game logic, or placement of elements changed from level to level? How did these changes contribute to the experience of the game for you?

**MYST:** Analyze a complex puzzle in Myst and focus on one or more of the following questions. How exactly is the puzzle constructed to maximize challenge and player enjoyment? Is the puzzle dynamic in any way, or is it completely predetermined? What kind of problem-solving skills were required to solve the puzzle? How did the puzzle relate to or contribute to the narrative of the game?

**Zork:** Play Zork for an extended period of time without the assistance of walkthroughs or any kind of online help. Did you feel a sense of engagement and immersion into the game, as related by some of the players in the film we watched during the lecture? Were you immersed in the game narrative, in the game space, or just in the game structure of problem-solving? What aspects of Zork contributed to your engagement and which aspects contributed to your disengagement?
Warning: They may still not like Zork

“Zork was the first text-based adventure game I have ever played and probably the last text-based adventure game I will ever play. “
-Actual student report
Takeaway

- A student should know 100s of games.
- Dedicated class required.
- We can now refer to Zork.
- Significant boon to other classes taught.
- Co-teaching brings faculty on same page.

gamecenter.nyu.edu / www.jesperjuul.net
READINGS VS. OBJECTS
Two intro class models

UC San Diego, COCU 177
Game studies intro
Lecture, plus games as *readings*
http://www.noahwf.com/08spring/gamestudies/

UC Santa Cruz, CMPS 80K
Game design intro (designed by Jim Whitehead)
Lecture, plus games as *objects of study*
http://classes.soe.ucsc.edu/cmps080k/Spring11/
Same synchronic strategy

Readings and lectures/demos blending historical, technical, and cultural view — plus game availability

More options: Wii just published & Amiga coming soon
Same diachronic strategy

Gameplay genre evolution in historical context: Juul’s matching tiles and Whitehead’s shmups

Historical dialogue of 2D platformers
Different ways students see games

Games as readings

Games as objects of study
Games as readings

“Readings” are familiar

New parameters: not “finishing” but time/level, playing with others

“Readings” need to be legally available to all students, with time flexible
Games as objects of study

Essay analyzing three games
Across platform generations
Using mechanics related to student’s game project
(Jim Whitehead originated)
Games as readings: access

- Using specialty distributors (Clara)
- Worked with campus IT to install games
- Worked with copyright holders for lab
- Worked with dept staff for lending library (integrated with equip checkout)
- Worked with campus bookstore to stock Atari Flashback 2
Games as objects of study: access

Dedicated historical gaming lab, with older consoles always set up

Lending collection of ~700 games and systems, including just-added iPad
The essentials

- Adding game history in a rigorous way
- Using lecture and assignment structure to move beyond the pure pleasure/dislike of retro play
- Giving student access that doesn’t discriminate against those with limited economic means or require student availability at fixed times (beyond class)
PLAYING OLD GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM
Courses and Activities

- CMS.300 Introduction to Videogame Studies
- CMS.612 Writing for Videogames
- Friday Games at GAMBIT

http://mit.academia.edu/ClaraFernandezVara/Teaching
Legal Download Sites and Rereleases
Emulators and Fair Use
Old games can be very hard
How do we overcome that?
Playing Together Always Helps
Read the Manual!
Manuals Online
Takeaways

- Diversifying examples to give students a sense of history.
- There are many resources to get older games legally.
- Using emulators and ROMs should be covered by fair use: we’re educators.
- Old games can be difficult, even for “gamers”
  - Find manuals
  - Communal play helps getting games across.
- Manuals and old magazines are invaluable resources to understand games in context.
Thank you

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