

Last but Not Least?

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Does the history of games have to be so preoccupied with the notion of the first? It is not only the initial phases of various game phenomena that demand in-depth historical studies. The late stages require our attention, too.

Since the late 1970s, many journalists, scholars, and amateur historians around the world have embarked on a quest to investigate the origins of this new form of ludic expression called *video games*. Countless publications have been written on the subject of possible candidates for the title of the first video game (ever or in a given country) or the first commercial production (e.g., in a given national market). Other similar works dealt with the first iteration of a given genre or the first use of a certain aesthetic trope, design choice, technical solution, and so on. The search for these kinds of paradigm shifters is typical of what Jaakko Suominen calls enthusiast historiographies of video games,¹ reminiscent of Erkki Huhtamo's "chronicle era" of writing history.² On one hand, these inquiries are an easy target for criticism, as they follow the (mostly discredited) teleological narrative of technological progress and are often distorted by nostalgia and the personal gaming experiences of the authors. On the other, as Suominen and Anna Sivula point out,³ they are an important part of the cultural heritage process, as they represent an attempt at historicizing the past, and what can serve this purpose better than the search for the early monuments?

However, after several decades, the historical process behind the development of video games has reached a scale that demands a more diverse and nuanced set of historiographical approaches. This can already be seen in the works of contemporary game historians contesting mainstream narratives⁴ or exploring the translocal context of gaming cultures.⁵ I

have no doubt there is space for even more diversity in research, and I am sure this journal will enable many new lines of inquiry and endorse spot-on critical interventions.

The specific and still underdeveloped approach I would like to promote here is focused on the late phases of various game histories. So far, only several researchers have engaged with this sort of material.⁶ The study of late periods (e.g., of a platform life cycle or a development scene) has one principal advantage: it sheds light on some otherwise overlooked transitional moments in history, just like the study of late antiquity offers a better understanding of the transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages. For example, in our studies of the late 8-bit scenes of the 1990s in Poland,⁷ we have recognized the crucial role of the demoscene in the early retrogaming movements in Central Europe and uncovered many transnational connections between local 8-bit scenes. It seems that while the study of pioneers and paradigm shifters often revolves around dominant game markets, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Japan, the study of late bloomers engages with less investigated or even peripheral scenes. But this is not the rule as, for example, the late Sega Dreamcast scene was prominent in the dominant markets.⁸

However appealing this approach might be, it is obviously not free of potential weaknesses and requires just as rigorous critical evaluation as the study of firstness. For example, it is prone to fall under the influence of decline narratives, as represented by Edward Gibbon's famous study of the "fall" of the Roman Empire.⁹ Another threat lies in the ana- or parachronistic evaluation of the period based on longer historical narratives, as for example, in the case of art history: rejection of late works of the Renaissance by Giorgio Vasari¹⁰ or affirmation of Rembrandt's late style by Georg Gronau (in anticipation of Impressionism).¹¹ Thankfully, the history of games can benefit from hindsight not only with regard to its own source material but also the experience of other fields, such as the history of art, media, and technology.

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Footnotes

1. ^ Jaakko Suominen, “How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 544–62.
2. ^ Erkki Huhtamo, “Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble: An Archaeology of Arcade Gaming,” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 3–22.
3. ^ Jaakko Suominen and Anna Sivula, “Participatory Historians in Digital Cultural Heritage Process: Monumentalization of the First Finnish Commercial Computer Game,” in “Born Digital Cultural Heritage,” special issue, *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media* 27 (2016), <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2016/09/02/suominen-sivula/>.
4. ^ See Laine Nooney, “A Pedestal, a Table, a Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History,” *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013), <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>; Riccardo Fassone, “Cammelli and Attack of the Mutant Camels: A Variantology of Italian Video Games of the 1980s,” *Well Played* 6, no. 2 (2017): 55–71; and Benjamin Nicoll, *Minor Platforms in Video Game History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).
5. ^ Melanie Swalwell, “Towards the Preservation of Local Computer Game Software Challenges, Strategies, Reflections,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into*

New Media Technologies 15, no. 3 (2009): 263–79; Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); and Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

6. ^ On the late ZX Spectrum scene, see: Jaroslav Švelch, “Keeping the Spectrum Alive: Platform Fandom in a Time of Transition,” in *Fans and Videogames: Histories, Fandom, Archives*, ed. Melanie Swalwell, Angela Ndalianis, and Helen Stuckey (London: Routledge, 2017), 57–74.

7. ^ Maria B. Garda and Pawel Grabarczyk, “Polish Late 8-bit Games of the 1990’s” (paper presented at Central and Eastern European Game Studies conference, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mfALORbR14>.

8. ^ Skot Deeming and David Murphy, “Pirates, Platforms and Players: Theorising Post-Consumer Fan Histories through the Sega Dreamcast,” in Swalwell, Ndalianis, and Stuckey, *Fans and Videogames*, 75–90.

9. ^ See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire—Volume the First* (1776).

10. ^ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (1568; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

11. ^ Georg Gronau, *Meisterwerke in Cassel: Rembrandt* (Berlin: Verlag Julius Bard, 1923).