

Chapter 18

Knowing the Game: A Review of Videogames and Entertainment Software in the United States – Trends and Future Research Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Videogames are in transition from an adolescent playtime to a major economic and cultural force in American society. There is an opportunity at this critical juncture to pull together the threads of discourse to develop a mature research agenda. To do so, we must understand the ultimate status of gaming research in our recent past. The objective of this chapter is to conduct a review analysis of the videogame and entertainment software industry, broadly defined, in the United States. This chapter investigates research productivity over the last ten years and focuses on the peer-reviewed, refereed journal articles published in this space.

The key questions of this chapter are: “How is the videogame story being told? To what extent and in what ways does this present an opportunity and provide basis for further research?” The chapter assumes that researchers respect the potential of videogames as influential in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres (Crandall & Sidak 2006; Guest 2002). As videogames are relatively new, serious academic discourse has only recently been undertaken. A groundswell of research indicates the multiple dimensions of videogames and what options and frameworks are available for designing and applying them (Gee 2005; Hemp 2006; Munro 2007).

The chapter serves as an introduction to current thinking about the role of games in our society. It takes a measured tone in acknowledging some of the challenges to understanding the myriads impacts of this emergent scholarly discipline. It discusses the current threads of discourse and reveals how most

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academic studies have concentrated on one specific videogame genre or aspect as the starting point for general assumptions about this field. Specifically, some empirical studies link the use of videogames to edu-technical benefits, associated risk factors, and health rewards/treatment. These views have dominated current discourse, and as a result, much of the subtlety is lost on the economic, social, cultural and policy impacts of this lucrative and complex socio-technological phenomenon. The results of this study draw insights into the present and future of gaming research. It also indicates that although videogame and entertainment software research is growing, it is limited.

INTRODUCTION

“The video game industry is entering a new era, an era where technology and creativity will fuse to produce some of the most stunning entertainment of the 21st Century. Decades from now, cultural historians will look back at this time and say it is when the definition of entertainment changed forever.”-Douglas Lowenstein, Founder and Former President of the Entertainment Software Association (2006).

Lowenstein’s comments provoke thought and challenge our existing notions. It strikes at the heart of the question of whether videogames¹ can ever truly mature as an artistic and social medium. In less than three decades the videogame and entertainment software industry has emerged as a huge transnational media industry, with sales comparable to the Hollywood movie industry. Yet, little is known about this industry and stereotypes may not be correct. The chapter identifies what is known, and what needs to be known.

Increasingly researchers respect the potential of videogames as influential in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres. As videogames are relatively new, serious academic discourse has only recently been undertaken (Funk et al 2000; Bryce & Rutter, 2002a; IDSA 2003; DIGRA 2007). Currently, the discipline is called Ludology, from ludus which is Latin for game. As a recent discipline, it already boasts a field of scholarly

literature including journals, professional organizations and academic centers. It draws upon such diverse disciplines as linguistics, sociology, computer science, psychology, semiotics and cultural studies.

Videogames have been used for technical and professional training (Wolfe & Crookall, 1998). Military strategists and business professionals have used videogames for planning (Wilson, 2008). New terms have been added or adapted in the English language from the industry including avatars, anime, artificial intelligence, teabagging, spawn, sim, and so on. These words have garnered considerable representation in the videogame lexicon of academia and government studies (Hemp 2006; Meadows 2007; Wilson 2008).

However, this “industry” has not been previously studied as a whole, and it is arguably important to do so as part of the socio-cultural context in which information and communications technologies (ICTs) are designed, developed, implemented and used, that is to treat videogames as being contextually and socially embedded rather than universally disembodied. This chapter aims to discuss the current threads of discourse on the videogame business in the U.S. Most previous studies have concentrated on one specific videogame genre or aspect as the starting point for general assumptions about attraction, education and influence. These views, having dominated current discourse, rarely discuss the economic, business, social, cultural and policy impacts of

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