

A Brief Social History of Game Play

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ABSTRACT

Who has played video games? Where have they played them? And how have games helped or hindered social networks and communities? This article answers these historical questions for the birthplace of commercial video games—the United States. Moving from the descriptive to the analytical, it begins with the basic trends and figures: who played, when, where and why, and how changes in technology have impacted the social side of gaming. An immediate pattern appears—for both industrial and political reasons, the early 1980s were a crucial turning point in the social history of video game play. What began as an open and free space for cultural and social mixing was quickly transformed through social constructions that had little to do with content, the goals of the producers, or even demand. The legacy of that era persists today, influencing who plays, how we view games, and even how we investigate their uses and effects.

KEYWORDS

Video game, social history, diffusion, technology

Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play.

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Who has played video games? Where have they played them? And how have games helped or hindered social networks and communities? This article answers these historical questions for the birthplace of commercial video games—the United States. In the U.S., our collective stereotype conjures up an immediate image: Isolated, pale-skinned teenage boys sit hunched forward on a sofa in some dark basement space, obsessively mashing buttons. In contrast, the statistics and accounts tell a very different story—one of often vibrant social settings and diverse playing communities. Why do American conceptions of gamers diverge from reality? This paper explains both the imagery and the reality. Moving from the descriptive to the analytical, it begins with the basic trends and figures: who played, when, where and why, and how changes in technology have impacted the social side of gaming. Data are presented in charts and tables, along with a narrative that explains the trends. The data cover sales, recreational spending, the diffusion and penetration of home consoles and computer systems, and media coverage. An immediate pattern appears—for both industrial and political reasons, the early 1980s were a crucial turning point in the social history of video game play. What began as an open and free space for cultural and social mixing was quickly transformed through social constructions that had little to do with content, the goals of the producers, or even demand. The legacy of that era persists today, influencing who plays, how we view games, and even how we investigate their uses and effects.

The analysis covers ambivalent reactions to new media technologies, social trends and the influence of political movements. In particular, it covers the contested areas of age, gender and place, illustrating how each has been constructed for gaming in a seemingly “natural” state. As a result, other issues of power and control have been covered up or altered, in favor of some groups and at the expense of others. Given the gaps between image and reality that the paper

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presents, it concludes with suggestions for how researchers should proceed, with special attention focused on social scientists using social learning theory-based effects models.

This paper was written for inclusion in a forthcoming edited volume on game research to be published by Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates. It has been reviewed and edited by several scholars and has been finalized for publication. However, the publishing date is late in 2005, and this material has not been presented elsewhere.