

Next gen? A critical examination of historical periodization in video games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to provide a critical overview of periodization categories used in various discourses on video games (both academic and popular) from the point of view of historical sense-making. We focus, for the sake of our conference presentation, on a selected case study: the notion of “generations”. We recognize periodization as an important part of the historicization of video games (Suominen and Sivula 2016). Even though there has been some theoretical reflection in that area, for example, on the prevailing linearity and the US-Japan centrism in video game historiography (e.g. Swalwell 2007, Wilson 2007, Newman 2012, Lowood & Guins 2016), we think there is still a lot to be learnt from other traditions of historical periodization, such as general history (Rüsen 1996 and 2012; Friedman 2015), art history (DaCosta Kaufmann 2010) or media history (Briggs & Burke 2002; Winston 1998), including film studies (Smith 1998). Thanks to a systematic review of existing literature and a critical examination of dominant temporal categories, we hope to open a discussion on exploring alternative methods of periodization in video games history.

Historical presentations of video games are an important part of game culture, as such they are not only the domain of historical studies but can also be found in popular discourses: in magazines, online forums, or even in marketing materials. Even though the modes of presentations may vary (Suominen 2016), they usually share some common characteristics. Applying Rüsen’s (1996) typology, we can observe that a typical history of video games is of traditional type. Usually, such a presentation attempts to: (a) establish what was the first game (e.g. “how it all started?”), (b) create timelines (e.g.

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chronicles of everything important in every year), (c) recognize turning points (e.g. the video game crash of 1983), (d) introduce a new hardware generation, or (e) a new game genre. Historical presentations, in most cases, create some sort of periodization.

Historical periodization is one of the basic practices of “making historical sense of the past” (Rüsen 2012). Naming a period bookends time: periodization presumes beginning and ending points. Historical periodization also enfold, explicitly or implicitly, a presumption of spatial, social and cultural location. The prevailing periodization of general history, for example, names a progression of periods from the ancient to the classical, medieval, early modern, and modern, designations that have deeply informed the study of the arts, literature, and philosophy as well. This periodization actually implicitly refers to Europe (Friedman 2015, 87-88). Historiography of video games is often based on similar presumptions but specific to the cultural history of that medium. As a practice of making sense of the historical narratives, any periodization enables diachronic comparisons. The historiographical questions concerning periodization have, in recent 20 years, been related to the methodological aspects of comparative history, and the fundamental considerations about historical memory as the universal cultural means of orienting human practical life in its temporal dimensions (Rüsen 1996, 5).

Arguably, the most widely used form of periodization related to video games remains to be the notion of “generations” (e.g. Therrien & Picard 2016). Even though it has been sometimes called into question, it is still predominant in the popular discourse (such as the usage of the notion of “next-gen” in gaming press), encyclopedias (e.g. Wikipedia) and databases (e.g. igdb.com). We argue that there are at least three reasons why the notion of a generation cannot be used as a basis of a serious periodization project. First of all, it functions as a marketing strategy rather than a precise category because the divisions between generations cannot be associated with any non-arbitrary specification of hardware. For example, it is far from obvious why the Nintendo Wii U, which was very similar to the architecture of Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, should be classified as a part of the eighth generation of consoles (along with Xbox One and PlayStation 4). Second of all, the notion of generations is very much centered on the American console market and does not fit well with microcomputers popular in Europe in the 80s and 90s. For example, the number of “bits” used to characterize generations of computer hardware (8, 16, 32 bits) cannot be easily applied to all consoles. Similarly, it seems impossible to apply the notion of generations to PC hardware, which makes classification of games problematic (the same game is a “generation 5” games on consoles but not on the PC). Third of all, the idea of “mid-generational” hardware revisions introduced lately by Sony (Playstation 4 Pro) and Microsoft (Xbox One X) calls the notion of a generation into question even from the point of view of a marketing strategy.

We hope this study can be useful not only for game history researchers but also, first and foremost, to the growing numbers of game history memory institutions, such as museums and archives, as well as independent retrogaming networks. The study can be used as a point of reference, for example, when designing a new exhibition on game history, or updating an already existing one.

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