

Imaginary Platforms: The Neo Geo AES and the Object a of Videogame History

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the Neo Geo Advanced Entertainment System (AES), a ‘home arcade’ console first released in Japan by SNK in 1990. It focuses specifically on the Neo Geo AES’s (allegedly failed) attempt to reproduce the experience of playing arcade videogames in the home—the platform’s primary selling point at the time—and it does so in order to make the provocation that the arcade-home divide was not technological but rather discursive and psycho-social. The Neo Geo AES was designed to support high-quality ports of software originally designed for SNK’s arcade machines, and its controller featured a joystick and button layout reminiscent of arcade-style control schemes. Videogame magazines in the 1980s and early 1990s often presented the arcade and its videogames as benchmarks against which home console hardware and software could be evaluated (Guins, 2014: 113). The arcade—understood here as a floating signifier (Skolnik and Conway, 2019: 758)—was valorised as a cultural touchstone, tastemaker, and source of identity formation for videogame culture. The Neo Geo AES was subsequently viewed as a platform capable of bridging the gap between the ‘high-powered’ public space of the arcade and the ‘technologically inferior’ private space of the home.

Drawing on an archive of magazine materials as well as a conception of the imaginary derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, I argue that the Neo Geo AES can be usefully understood as an ‘imaginary platform’. By this I do not mean that the console was not real or never progressed beyond prototype phase. There are many examples of speculative videogame technologies that never materialized, but the Neo Geo AES is not one of them. Yet, like any speculative technology, the Neo Geo AES captured the impossible desires, unfulfilled expectations, and collective anxieties of its cultural period. At the time of its release, the platform’s promise to reproduce arcade-perfect videogame play in the home seemed to magazine writers like a veritable dream come true, such that it was described as ‘the future’ of videogames by two separate magazines (Olson, 1991: 14; ‘SNK Announces Stateside Release of New Neo Geo System’, 1990: 29). But the console’s ensuing magazine reception—which was almost universally critical—suggests that SNK misdiagnosed the true nature of the arcade-home divide. The irony here is that, in terms of its technical specifications, the Neo Geo AES arguably succeeded in bridging the gap between the arcade and the home. But the arcade-home divide was not only technological; it was also discursive and, as argued below, indicative of displaced desires.

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It is often argued that people stopped playing arcade videogames in the 1980s and early 1990s simply because home consoles became powerful enough to absorb the arcade and its qualities. But my analysis suggests that the arcade's destabilization was equally—if not primarily—predicated on a discursive and psycho-social shift, wherein the collective desire for frenzied and fast-paced arcade videogames was displaced by a desire for more sedate, long-term, and narrative-oriented home console experiences. This shift in desire only became recognizable (and thus articulated in the magazine discourses) once the Neo Geo AES was actually *in* the home. Only then did magazine writers realise that they no longer desired arcade videogames in the home at all, and that a new 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961: 47) was beginning to take hold in videogame culture. The Neo Geo AES's failure to secure autonomy in the fast-growing home console market was, therefore, symptomatic of the arcade's fall from grace in videogame culture, and SNK's mistimed entry into this critical juncture of videogame history.

The Neo Geo AES's failure, then, played out in the realm of the imaginary. Here, I draw inspiration from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic construction of the imaginary. Lacan famously argues that the unconscious is structured like a language. Humans are born into a world constituted by language. However, the child's acquisition of language is also associated with a foundational 'cut'—a lack or loss. Language alienates subjects from their instinctual desires. By attaching (written or spoken) signifiers to objects of desire, objects get caught up in an inescapable web of semiotic meaning, which sets up something of a semiotic-psycho interface between the signifier and the signified. In other words, something is lost in the gap between signifier and signified—something that, according to Lacan, is constitutive of our very subjectivity. We are thus compelled to constantly seek out and re-experience this foundational loss—what Lacan calls object *a*—in our encounters with objects, especially commodities (McGowan, 2016). I want to argue, here, that the Neo Geo AES is a paradigmatic example of object *a* in videogame history, in that it promised to satisfy a supposedly foundational desire (bringing arcade videogames into the home), but in doing so, revealed a perennial lack or loss underlying said desire (we did not really want arcade videogames in the home after all, but rather something different).

The implications of this argument are twofold. Firstly, it reaffirms the notion that videogame history is not driven by technological advancements and generational ruptures (see Arsenault, 2017: 12 and Therrien and Picard, 2016). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it suggests that our collective experience of videogame history is characterized by a repetition of an inability to obtain a lost object of desire. In the Neo Geo AES's case, an impossible desire (arcade videogames in the home) was articulated in the magazine discourses (and thus codified in language), but when people were confronted with the reality of this desire, an underlying lack or loss was exposed (arcade videogames seem out of place in the home), and the object *a* of videogame history became articulated to a new desire (what we really desire is sedate, long-term, narrative-oriented home console experiences). Ultimately, this paper makes three critical points about videogame history and historiography: firstly, that the Neo Geo AES can be viewed less as an outright failure and more as a victim of its own success; secondly, that the arcade-home divide was discursive, rather than technological; and finally, that videogame history is characterized not by generational advancements but rather by displaced desires and experiences of loss.

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