

Lineages: historicising the videogame

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INTRODUCTION

Being able to place the videogame within its cultural and historical context is one of the most pressing challenges for game studies. “Always historicize!” runs Fredric Jameson’s famous call at the beginning of *The Political Unconscious* (1981, 9), and although this is a challenge that has not infrequently been undertaken in studies of the videogame or associated media, rarely has a framework to approach such a complex series of relationships been sketched out. As Jameson notes, such historicizing work is not just about reconstructing the historical moment of the emergence of a text, but it is – perhaps more importantly – also about foregrounding “the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text in question.” (1981, 9)

Indeed, such questions of lineages have often silently been at the heart of the key debates of game studies and the way that videogames are understood more popularly. These debates may overtly be about field-defining questions such as techniques and approaches to videogame theory and criticism, but they often present in the day-to-day instead as disagreements as to the cultural and material origins of the videogame itself. We may question, as many did in the formative years of games studies, whether there is a kind of essence of ‘play’ (Aarseth, 2001) lies at the heart of the videogame, or a ‘configurative practice’ (Moulthrop, 2004), or whether instead it is a “messy, hybrid assemblage” that remediates a host of other audiovisual media (Keogh, 2014). Such fundamental questions about the nature of the videogame can be helpfully reframed by an appeal to history: in order to understand this media form, do we see it through a lineage of moving image technologies, representation, play, leisure activities, digital technology or other fields? That is, we can ask not *what* the videogame is, but *when* it is.

Therefore, this paper will investigate the approaches used by media historians in other fields and propose a theoretical framework for historicizing the videogame. Particularly, I am interested in establishing the value of film historian Thomas Elsaesser’s ‘The New Film History as Media Archaeology’ (2004), where, drawing on Foucault (1977), he outlines a way of thinking of “the history of image and sound technologies as made up less of a family tree and more of ‘family relations’ – belonging together, but neither causally or teleologically related to each other.” This approach is augmented by a number of historians beyond game studies (Bruno 2002; Friedberg, 2006; Ndalianis, 2004; Zielinski, 1999) whose work this paper will also build on. This paper will conclude by exploring the theoretical implications of locating the videogame within this shared set of ‘family relations’ for image and sound technologies.

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