Fighting the Cold War in the Virtual Streets: Video Games as a Source Base for Social and Cultural History

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Abstract
In 1991, a blond-haired, blue-eyed soldier with an American Flag tattooed on either shoulder brawled with a burly, scarred Soviet ex-wrestler in a Moscow factory. As the two opponents squared off, an aggressive, drunken crowd watched the spectacle with frenzied fervor. For less than 20 seconds, the two combatants engaged in vicious conflict, exchanging punishing blows and bone-crunching body-slams. After one final flurry of violence the soldier slammed the Soviet’s head into the ground. The Soviet remained on the ground, broken and bruised as the American soldier stood triumphantly, confidently over him...

Disciplines
Cultural History | Diplomatic History | European History | Graphics and Human Computer Interfaces | Social History | United States History

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Fighting the Cold War in the Virtual Streets: Video Games as a Source Base for Social and Cultural History

In 1991, a blond-haired, blue-eyed soldier with an American Flag tattooed on either shoulder brawled with a burly, scarred Soviet ex-wrestler in a Moscow factory. As the two opponents squared off, an aggressive, drunken crowd watched the spectacle with frenzied fervor. For less than 20 seconds, the two combatants engaged in vicious conflict, exchanging punishing blows and bone-crunching body-slams. After one final flurry of violence the soldier slammed the Soviet’s head into the ground. The Soviet remained on the ground, broken and bruised as the American soldier stood triumphantly, confidently over him.

This brawl was not a historical event in the traditional sense. This fight was enacted in the digital world of Street Fighter II: The World Warrior, a head-to-head action fighting game designed by the Japanese digital entertainment company Capcom and released in the post-Cold War United States in the early 1990s. Although the brawl between the virtuous American soldier and the unsavory Soviet brute happened only virtually, it happened again and again—reenacted daily as thousands of American children picked up their controllers and sat down to save the world, once again, from the Soviet “menace.”

The basic premise of Street Fighter II is a simple one. It is a game in which a player chooses one of eight characters and fights a series of opponents one-on-one, ultimately

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encountering the “boss” to prove, with his defeat, that he/she is the greatest warrior in the world. Enormously successful, *Street Fighter II* revitalized the arcade game industry and jumpstarted sales in the 16-bit generation of home console game systems including the SEGA Genesis and Super Nintendo Entertainment System. In fact, the game is the number one selling unit in Capcom’s history with 6.3 million units sold for the Super Nintendo alone.²

Video games such as *Street Fighter II* have become one of the most important forms of popular media in contemporary society, warranting their own release parties, action-figures, strategy guides, playing cards, clothing lines, television shows and movies. At the same time, the internet is aflame with discussions, in dozens of languages, of the latest games in chat rooms, blogs and discussion networks. One financial analyst put the value of the video game industry in 2010 at $105 billion dollars.³ While this figure is still significantly less than the movie industry, it is clear that gaming is a major force within popular culture.

Particularly since the early 1990s, video games have permeated popular culture so successfully that their image has changed dramatically. Players who spent their free time with a controller in front of a screen used to be social outcasts, but now it seems as if those who do not play video games are the ones ostracized. Especially for those who grew up in the 1990s, video games are a childhood experience that instantly provides a connection across potential cultural

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² The “16-bit” generation refers the processing power of the console. This generation consisted of the SEGA Genesis and Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES). The previous generation of home consoles was the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) which was 8-bit. Current home consoles such as the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360 do not function on the bit system. The processing power of these systems, like computers, are measured in hertz. For the numbers of video game units sold by Capcom, see John Scalzo, “Street Fighter II is the bestselling Capcom game of all-time,” [http://www.gamingtarget.com/article.php?artid=9772](http://www.gamingtarget.com/article.php?artid=9772), accessed August 21, 2011.

divides such as sex, race, or class. As a result, historians of the late 20th century must divert their attention to the crucial role that video games played in reflecting and affecting popular consciousness as a way to understand the social and cultural values of American society. *Street Fighter* II, in particular, is a reflection and perpetuation of the historical biases of the Cold War world. The game uses characters and backgrounds that mirror many of the stereotypes in economics and politics that pervaded Western society during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Yet historians have been slow to grasp the significance that video games hold for the historical profession. The historiography of video games is unconscionably thin. The vast majority of books are pop-histories written by video game enthusiasts, the sheer number of which demonstrates a demand for information on the topic. Professional historians that have used video games as a source have, for the most part focused exclusively on the significance of technological aspects of the industry and offer no analysis on the cultural or social aspects of video games and their meaning to society. The work that most closely accomplishes this goal is an edited volume by historian Mark Wolf titled *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to Playstation and Beyond*. Wolf’s book is a collection of more than forty essays that discusses many aspects of video games and gaming culture. Yet, the weakness of this volume is that the contributors are not historians. Other than Wolf, the contributors are video game enthusiasts who do not put their work into the broader historical context or use any methodological approach other than documenting the significant events in the history of video games.

There are many potential reasons that historians have not yet mined this rich source for evidence of social trends. Not all historians have accepted the reliability of cultural interpretations in the historical profession. Other historians may not be willing to utilize the
relatively recent explosion of video games as a source-base due to concerns regarding objective source interpretation. Perhaps more well-established historians may not even realize how prominent video games have become because they grew up before video games became central to contemporary society.

The limited historiography presents a major lapse in an otherwise inventive profession. Video games provide the potential to uncover powerful meanings and tensions regarding social, cultural, economic, intellectual, racial, moral or gender issues in contemporary society. Games of all types, including those produced digitally, are types of mass culture that directly reflect the values of the societies that play them. Restating the argument about the nature of play put forth by Johan Huizenga in *Homo Ludens*, Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964 that “[a]s extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of culture.”

Although McLuhan studied games right as they entered the digital world his point is still valid. Games of all types, including video games, are types of mass culture that directly reflect the values of the society that they are played in. Extending the argument, sociologist Eugene F. Provenzo wrote in 1991 that video games are “instrumentalities through which a [person’s] understanding of his culture is mediated…In this context, video games…represent very specific social and symbolic cultural constructs.”

What these, and other scholars argue, is that video games and the cultural representations used therein to construct the characters, backgrounds, and storylines become educational cornerstones of the person playing the game. As a result, the representations of characters in video games are foundationally significant for understanding popular culture; they educate those who play them with the cultural values of those who create

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More importantly, video games are distinct—and particularly revealing—form of popular culture. The creators of video games—like other creators of popular culture—do not hold hegemonic control over popular representations of culture; they do not tell people what to think. In order to sell games, they must negotiate social norms and expectations to create games that will appeal to the widest audience by shaping their characters and storylines to match what popular society expects. As a result, video games represent a negotiation between creator and audience, balancing the game designers’ production of new art forms and popular conceptions of where the boundaries of those cultural representations should lie. At the same time, video games are interactive in a way that radio or television programs are not. Video games allow gamers to control their character and enter into an alternate reality that is a complete social construction. Ultimately, video games reflect a debate over the boundaries that designers create and popular society accepts as well as an arena to understand social and cultural trends that are otherwise obscured by social norms.

Examples of the powerful role that video games can have for historical analysis are seen in Street Fighter II. This game gives historians an added perspective on well-studied topics, such as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union that emerged in the 20th century. The game demonstrates a distinct bias against anything that was communistic, and many biases against non-Western cultures. In at least two cases, the designers of this game created culturally specific characters based on stereotypes in order to sell more units. Notes from the developmental stage of Street Fighter II show that Guile “is a “normal” (or average-stat)
character put in for Americans to use.”6 The designers of the game also noted that the Japanese character E. Honda, a sumo wrestler, would “be recognized by Americans as well as have strong appeal in Japan.”7

The fight between the American soldier and Soviet ex-wrestler is revealing. Guile is a Major in the United States Air Force. He wears dog tags, camouflage pants and army boots, while his shirt is a military issue tank top. He is blond-haired, blue-eyed, stands 6’1”, weighs 191 pounds and has an American flag tattoo on either shoulder. He is the prototypical American military man; tall, muscular, clean-cut, and clean shaven. He represents the strong, physical nature of the United States, without becoming a caricature of hyper-masculinity.8

In contrast, the character from the USSR, Zangief, is a Russian ex-professional wrestler who was kicked out of the sport for cheating. He wears the outfit of a professional wrestler and has many scars on his body. He has dark brown hair shaved into a mohawk, a full beard, a mass of chest hair, stands 7’ tall and weighs 256 pounds.9 His physique is prototypical of the Western perception of the Soviet warrior; hulking, oversized, beastly and wild. When compared to Guile, Zangief clearly represents the widely held Western perception of the violent, savage nature of the Soviet Union. Note the contrasting body marks of the characters. Guile’s tattoos are marks of cognizant patriotism. Zangief received his marks from “grappling with

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9 All the characters in Street Fighter II: The World Warrior have a fighting weight that is drastically less than how they look on the screen. The muscular physique of each character for their height would require them to be 25-50% heavier than listed.
grizzly bears in the snow-covered Siberian mountains.”¹⁰ The symbolism lies just beneath the surface. Tattoos are the mark of civilization; Guile made a conscious choice to display his patriotism. Zangief received his scars from wrestling with bears; his marks are a result of his intimate, savage, animalistic encounters with nature.

Ultimately, comparing characters in *Street Fighter II* uncovers a new and important way for historians to contextualize the Cold War. Representations of characters from the first and second worlds provides a perspective that supports scholarship regarding stereotypes between East and West before the end of the Cold War. Utilizing these numerous sources will continue to reap huge benefits in the scholarly community through a comparison of Cold War stereotypes in video games from the 1970s through the early 1990s and beyond.

At the same time, quantitative and thematic analyses of video games will show an added perspective on racial issues. Very few games have a main character of African descent. One of the prominent exceptions of this is the 2004 game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* where the main character is a black man in the fictional city of San Andreas who must go back to his ghetto to find his mother’s murderer. The main character must hustle, murder and steal his way through the city to complete the game. Representing one of the few black characters in video games as a violent gangbanger is a clear statement of the social context of race in the United States. However, the issue of race is not isolated to the controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series. In 2009, *Resident Evil 5* brought controversy to the video game world because of the game’s plotline implications. The white protagonists were sent to Africa to prevent the spread of a deadly virus that turned humans into zombies. Charges of racism quickly emerged

due to the fact that the heroes of the game had to brutally gun down thousands of black zombies. Racial issues permeate video game storylines and require scholarly attention in order to gain a broader perspective on the role of race in popular culture.

Similar approaches are required to understand the role of women in the digital world. Although the pattern is changing quickly, few women claim leading roles in video games. A notable exception is the character Samus in the video game Metroid. A ripple went through the video game world when the main character of one of the most popular games of the 1980s revealed himself—after beating the game—to be a woman. Gamers were stunned, and some were angry, that their leading character in an action game was female. Historians can look to the responses to the Metroid controversy and compare them to similar developments in the movie industry in films such as Alien in order understand the role of women in society in the 1980s. In particular, historians of popular media can compare movies and video games in order to judge whether one medium is more progressive than another, then use those conclusions as a lens with which to observe society.

By creating a base of quantitative works, historians will be able to compare video game storylines to broader historical trends when race and gender intersect in the United States. In many instances in American history, black men received social rights before white women. Black men received the right to vote before white women, a black man was president before a white woman, black men were allowed to actively serve in combat duty before women and only recently has the average salary of white women reached that of black men. What is important about this pattern is that gaming culture reverses this pattern. Although women are frequently depicted as the weaker sex, they have many more examples of powerful lead characters than black men. Analyses of why this may occur will complicate the study of gender
in Western culture. An approach that examines this trend in the virtual world would be valuable to understanding how this pattern continues in contemporary society.

Additionally, games are filled with material for historians that study intellectual, cultural and religious life, or many other aspects of society. The video game industry continues to create increasingly complex games. As a result, historians have been handed a unique, powerful, and immediately relevant source with which to study the values of contemporary society. Professors often lament the social and cultural stereotypes that students have when they attend their first university level history course. Studying video games, along with movies and music, will give historians a better foothold from which to understand how those stereotypes developed and will allow pedagogical professionals to better hold intellectual discourse with students. One study conducted by the Entertainment Software Rating Board noted that in 2010, 67% of households in the United States had at least one person who played video games.11 That number is likely to increase dramatically over time. Historians should spend time researching video games in order to speak the same language as the students they are teaching.

Video games are one of the major entertainment trends of the future. Some scholars may scoff at observation and argue that historians study the past. But video games have been an important part of popular culture since the second wave of the game explosion in the late 1980s. They will not go away as a medium, and as the video game industry expands so does its influence on popular culture. By ignoring social and cultural representations present in the games, historians neglect the social and cultural representations that are influencing a larger and

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11 “How Much Do You Know About Video Games,” [http://www.esrb.org/about/video-game-industry-statistics.jsp](http://www.esrb.org/about/video-game-industry-statistics.jsp). Accessed May 2, 2011. The ESRB is the Entertainment Software Rating Board. It is the oversight committee in charge of rating the content of video games, much like the rating system in the movie industry.
larger section of society. In order to accomplish the historians’ task of understanding the world we live in, and to remain relevant to a generation of Westerners raised on video games, the profession must turn its attention to the digital world as a text.