Pac-Man Fever! Mazes, merchandising and videogaming's first cultural icon
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Despite not being an immediate hit in Japan, Pac-Man flourished upon its release in the US and before long “Pac-Man Fever” was in full flow. “Soon, every pizza parlour, supermarket, and drug store in the US had to have one. It was all Midway [the game’s US importers] could do to keep up with the demand for the quarter-munching machines” (Loguidice & Barton, 2009: 181). By 1981, in the US, there were “approximately 250 million games of Pac-Man were being played on 100,000 Pac-Man machines in arcades every week” (Burnham, 2003: 234). According to Wolf (2008), the game is one of the highest grossing titles of all time, taking more than a billion dollars in the arcade alone and infamously causing a shortage of ¥100 coins in Japan.

This session explores Pac-Man from a number of perspectives: as a design object, considering it is a reaction to the dominant shooting games of the time; as a playable game which can be tackled, performed and perfected in a variety of different ways; and as a cultural phenomenon that, by extensive cross-media merchandising, gave the videogame industry its first cultural icon and marked Japan as an influential exporter of digital innovation and creativity.

Key readings:


Further reading:


'Slow, squashed, and six months late.' Playing Japanese videogames in Europe 1991-2017

In addition to delays in release dates and what often felt like disproportionately high prices, Japanese videogames looked, sounded and played different - and subjectively worse - when played on European consoles. Drawing on a number of case studies and with a particular focus on 1990s console games such as 1991’s Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega Mega Drive), this session explores some of the technical, institutional and marketing reasons for these audiovisual and experiential variations and the ‘instability’ (after Newman 2012a) of games as objects if play and study.

The session considers the impact of different TV standards in Europe and Japan and different practices for optimisation as well as the operation of ‘grey import’ markets shipping Japanese consoles and games in Europe. Following this, we will explore some key moments in the fan translation of games not receiving official release/localisation as well as the aesthetics of ‘bad’ translation. We will consider the penetration of phrases such as ‘All Your Base Are Belong To Us’ and the ways these have been re-appropriated by videogames fans and game developers (and audiences far beyond gaming) as a form of cultural capital.

The session concludes by thinking through the implications for scholars of videogames of what Giordano (2011) has called the ‘endless fragmentation’ of the medium and the absence of definitive, canonical instances/texts for study.

Key readings:


Further reading:


Super Mario (Re)Making: designing, playing, and playing with videogames.

Nintendo’s Super Mario Bros. videogames (1985-present) are revered by players and designers alike for their inventiveness and accessibility. Drawing on game design theory (such as Fullerton’s ‘player advocacy’) as well as techniques such as kishoutenketsu, this session seeks to identify the much-mythologised qualities of ‘Nintendoness’ and ‘personality’ (as Kline et al (2003) put it), that continue to lend the Super Mario Bros. games’ their renown and plaudits.

The session also considers the role and influence of Nintendo’s Super Mario Maker (2015) which blurs the boundaries between game development and gameplay by providing a suite of level design tools that allow the creation of new Super Mario stages for playing and sharing online. What is particularly interesting about Super Mario Maker is how Nintendo balances the celebration and reinforcement of its core design principles of player advocacy, inclusivity and accessibility alongside the altogether more ruthless, even openly hostile, ‘Kaizo’ designs created and shared by amateurs (illegally) hacking the original Super Mario code. The session considers Nintendo’s appropriation of these design techniques that apparently stand in opposition to its core principles of accessibility and player advocacy.

Key readings:


Further reading:


http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1920785&dl=ACM&coll=DL&CFID=716423832&CFTOKEN=50866509
Mario is Missing! Preserving videogames as cultural heritage

At a time when there are more gaming platforms and titles available than ever before, it might seem unlikely to claim that videogames are disappearing. Material and digital deterioration renders hardware and software unusable while retail and marketing practices create a discourse of perpetual innovation, supersession and obsolescence. The loss of this material denies future generations access to their cultural heritage and robs the next generation of developers historical reference material.

As Lowood et al (2009) put it, we must act ‘before it’s too late’. But, what form should this action take? And what is it we are seeking to preserve? This session explores existing work on game preservation and the challenges and opportunities ahead. We will consider these issues through a case study of Nintendo which examines the impact on game studies and historians of popular culture of the company’s deletion of levels from its Super Mario Maker network.

Key readings:


Further reading:


