ROUTLEDGE KEY GUIDES

Fifty Key Video Games

Edited by Bernard Perron, Kelly Boudreau,
Mark J.P. Wolf and Dominic Arsenault

FIFTY KEY VIDEO GAMES

This volume examines fifty of the most important video games that have contributed significantly to the history, development, or culture of the medium, providing an overview of video games from their beginning to the present day.

This volume covers a variety of historical periods and platforms, genres, commercial impact, artistic choices, contexts of play, typical and atypical representations, uses of games for specific purposes, uses of materials or techniques, specific subcultures, repurposing, transgressive aesthetics, interfaces, moral or ethical impact, and more. Key video games featured include *Animal Crossing*, *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Minecraft*, *PONG*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Tetris*, and *World of Warcraft*. Each game is closely analyzed in order to properly contextualize it, to emphasize its prominent features, to show how it creates a unique experience of gameplay, and to outline the ways it might speak about society and culture. The book also acts as a highly accessible showcase to a range of disciplinary perspectives that are found and practiced in the field of game studies.

With each entry supplemented by references and suggestions for further reading, *Fifty Key Video Games* is an indispensable reference for anyone interested in video games.

Bernard Perron is a Full Professor of Film and Game Studies at Université de Montréal. He co-edited, among others, *The Video Game Theory Reader 1* and *2* (2003; 2009), *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2014), and *Video Games and the Mind: Essays on Cognition, Affect and Emotion* (2016) and edited *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (2009). He is the author of *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine* (2012) and *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror* (2018). His research concentrates on video games, interactive cinema, the horror genre, and on narration, cognition, and the ludic dimension of narrative cinema.

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Dominic Arsenault is an Associate Professor of Film and Game Studies at Université de Montréal. His main publications revolve around narrative and narration in games, genre, and video game history, notably with his recent *Super Power, Spoony Bards, and Silverware: The Super Nintendo Entertainment System* in the MIT Press platform studies series. He teaches on narratology for film, games and literature, video game screenwriting, and animation film history and theory. He also explores the links between video games and heavy metal music through research and creation with his solo chipmetal project *Multi-Memory Controller*.

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INTRODUCTION

Video games continue to mature as a medium, as evidenced by the increasing number of entire museums dedicated to games curation, collection, and education such as *The National Videogame Museum* in Sheffield, England; the *Computerspiele Museum* in Berlin, Germany; and the *Strong National Museum of Play* in Rochester, New York, USA. These collections clearly demonstrate that individual games deserve to be viewed, played, and studied for their uniqueness. The Library of Congress already has thousands of games preserved for its archives, following the establishment of a "game canon" selected by a small committee of academics, designers, and journalists (Chaplin, 2007). The LoC's "game canon", though, is only a list of ten games said to have started genres that are still important today (see Chaplin, 2007); such a list is obviously too short and too limited to represent the medium as a whole. The World Video Game Hall of Fame of the *Strong National Museum of Play* is already more varied with its 32 inducted games.[1] From this perspective, we agreed that it is not enough to simply select and feature important games (however that is defined by individuals), but that there is a need for a reasonable, yet scholarly collection that situates a curated selection of games based on a range of criteria surrounding each title's contribution, contextualized within the broader social, technical, and cultural history of video games.

When we began to work on this collection, we were aware of the challenges we faced in editing a book of fifty key games without aiming to formally establish some kind of video game canon. We did not let ourselves be lulled by what Janet Staiger described in her foundational essay "The Politics of Film Canons" as "the illusion of consensus" (1985, p. 10). Neither did we indulge in the idea of neutrality, another illusion which Staiger discusses. Our aim was to collect a series of essays that focus on a wide range of contributions to game design, culture, aesthetics, and production. But in order to

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do so, we had to make conscious decisions as to what to include and examine what was being excluded in consequence. In "The Politics of Game Canonization: Tales from the Frontlines of Creating a National History of Games", Glas and van Vught summarize Staiger's argument very well:

> During all the different steps in the process from admission to selection and reflection, different values, different motifs, and different arguments are at play, steering the final selection of works into a specific direction. This selection often reinforces dominant social, political, economic and cultural ideologies and has the potential to marginalize others.
>
> (2019, p. 2)

It is indeed useful to reflect on the process through Staiger's three types of politics.

Staiger states that "[*c*]ompetition in academics and the film [*or, in our case, video game*] industry reinforces canons and canon-making", and that consequently an escape from canon formation is difficult to achieve. Identifying specific works brings attention and advantage to them. In our situation, we were mindful of the third kind of politics she mentions: the one of the Academy. Publishers wish to position themselves in the market of game studies publications and to have a canon of literature regarding video games. For us, admittedly, "academic reputations and economic rewards are also at stake" (Staiger, 1985, p. 19). The fact that the press is now publishing a book on key video games sheds light on the first kind of politics, namely the politics of admission. Whereas many of the early writings about cinema were "involved in proving film was an art" (1985, p. 4), the video game's current situation is very different.

The video game has become one of the main forms of cultural expression of the twenty-first century and was named the 10th Art in France in the mid-1990s. The discourses about it in the public sphere are numerous. Since the advent of the field of research called Game Studies, they have been examined from a variety of theories and disciplines, with colleges and universities dedicating whole programs to game design, game studies, and videoludic literacy. There is no longer the need to single out some strategically chosen games as objects worthy of admission into the realm of artworks, and art is not the only frame to be considered for inclusion.

Rather than the prescriptive politics of canon-making as a legitimizing strategy for video games in general, it is the second kind of politics distinguished by Staiger that remains at the core of the discussion around canonization: the politics of selection.

> In purely practical terms, a scholar of cinema [*or of video games*] cannot study every film [*or game*] ever made. Selection becomes a necessity and with selection usually comes a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Some films [*or games*] are moved to the center of attention; others, to the margins.
>
> (1985, p. 8)

These movements have important impacts on the appraisal of the works and are the ones that are scrutinized as well as questioned. Paring down the thousands of published video games and the hundreds of candidates that could be considered "key video games" to a mere fifty was nothing short of difficult. We would have been much happier to be able to include more games, a luxury had by a book like *1001 Video Games You Must Play Before You Die* (Mott, 2010) – but with only 300-word essays on each game, the book would not have delved into the games and would have remained largely just an annotated list. While the chapters in this collection were substantially longer, 2,500 words still greatly limits how deep we can delve into each game.

Of course, we are not the first to attempt such an exercise. Our colleagues behind *Fifty Key British Films* have eased our minds by expressing what we wished to propose. According to John White and Sarah Barrow (2008, p. xv), "the suggestion [*we really like this choice of word*] is more simply that this selection of [*games*] operates to provide an initial appreciation" of different aspects of the video game since its advent. We do not intend to assert that the video games we have chosen are the greatest. Similar to White and Barrow, our purpose is not to promote a particular canon of video games.

> The very nature of a 'canon' is that it is exclusive and this list is not designed to be that (other than in the sense that we only have room for 50 essays in this book). Nor is this list ranked in order of merit; there are two contents lists, one in date order and the other in alphabetical order, and both of these structures leave a virtually infinite space for your own additions.
>
> (2008, p. xv)

From the start, we envisioned this book as *Fifty Key Video Games* – not *THE Fifty Key Video Games*. There are dozens or even hundreds of key games (depending on how one defines "key"), and they vary according to individual tastes, interests, histories, and framings; but here are fifty of them, as a start. Rather than thinking in terms of "masterpieces", we worked around the idea of "key", taken as something that opens doors for the understanding of the games, and through these games, of the medium itself. Each author, then, situates the game they wrote about within the broader video game landscape, referencing other games within their historical, technological, cultural, and aesthetic context, essentially paying homage to those that came before them, and fundamentally opening the door for the reader to explore beyond the pages of the book.

While it was not easy to come up with this list of *Fifty Key Video Games*, we each nominated 50 games, explaining the rationale for inclusion. Our separate selections amounted to twice as much as required. Selections were then voted on and then further discussed to balance the many different factors under consideration, until we all agreed on a list that represented the diverse range of contributions that video games have to offer. Interestingly, only 20 games are part of the "games studies canon" identified by Jonathan Frome and Paul Martin (2019. p. 6), who wrote, "A content analysis of over 580 articles from the field's two main journals is used to identify the currently-invisible canon of most-frequently cited games in game scholarship" (Abstract). Our aim was not to develop a canon based on a citation count, or any other single criterion of success. We wanted to create a list of interesting games that perhaps were not always the top selling or most critically acclaimed, but were ones that contributed to several different aspects of video game history and culture. It is also important to understand that any individual reading of a game, even when the focus is on its key elements and contributions, will always be reductive and situated within the context and disciplinary frame of the author.

Our rationale in creating this list of fifty games is no exception. The selections are, of course, made from our own socio-cultural positions, as White North Americans, in our 40s and 50s, all working within games academia. Many nominations were informed, to some capacity, by our firsthand experiences with the games either as players, community members, or within our specific scholarly contexts. That being said, we also made sure not to privilege our personal favorite games or genres. In addition, we also considered the state of game studies scholarship; we sometimes avoided obvious choices to go for more interesting ones, or looked for contributors to explore novel, original facets of them. The final selection covers a range of historical periods and platforms, genres, commercial impact, artistic choices, contexts of play, representations, uses of games for specific purposes, uses of materials or techniques, specific subcultures, repurposing, transgressive aesthetics, interfaces, moral or ethical impact and more. Thus, serious discussion went into the selection of the games; the list is not merely the whim of a single author, but one in which each entry's merit had to be debated and accepted by the four of us.

Coming from different backgrounds and selected for their knowledge of the work analyzed, the various contributors were invited to frame the games discussed in their essays as keys that open ideas that they are researching. The chapters thus provide a glimpse into fifty doors, opened to areas of further research into the many disciplines that are practiced by the diverse cast of authors. The study of individual games through such a range of perspectives offers a broader understanding of games in general, as an important phenomenon.

Though the task of reducing our list of video games down to a mere fifty turned out to be quite the challenge, it was nonetheless a fun one. Our main wish is not different from the one of White and Barrow (2008, p. xv):

> Therefore, beyond the theoretical seriousness of discussions about the potential elitism, exclusivity and political manoeuvrings associated with the notion of canons, hopefully you will also simply enjoy agreeing and disagreeing with the inclusions and exclusions you find here.

The ludic dimension of the exercise should not be forgotten.

Note

1. 19 of its 32 inducted games are on our list: https://www.museumofplay.org/exhibits/world-video-game-hall-of-fame/inducted-games/

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FIFTY KEY VIDEO GAMES

ADVENTURE (1979)

Adventure is an Atari VCS (or Atari 2600) game cartridge published in 1979,[1] designed and developed by Warren Robinett. The gameplay consists in navigating a labyrinth, evading dragons and finding keys to retrieve the enchanted chalice. It sold over a million units and regularly ranks among significant historical games for the numerous "firsts"[2] often put to its credit: first action-adventure game, first game to cut between multiple screens, first fantasy-themed video game,[3] first Easter egg,[4] and first fog-of-war representation. Such a high level of innovation for a single game is remarkable even for a time in which genres were not as deeply entrenched. This radical departure from existing contemporary video games finds an explanation in Robinett's efforts to adapt a game from a very different platform to the Atari VCS (Robinett, 2005).

A Platform Adaptation

In 1979, Robinett had finished work on his first video game for the Atari company: *Slot Racers*, a more conventional two-player, single-screen chase and shoot game. He was beginning to think of his next title when a friend introduced him to a program called *Adventure*,[5] playable on a Stanford University mainframe computer. This text-only game, developed by William Crowther in 1976 and refined by Don Woods in 1977, was the sensation in computer labs across the United States. It is now considered as having initiated the adventure-game genre on computer platforms. Beyond the purely textual representation, *Adventure* (which itself had been inspired by Gygax and Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*, 1974) was radically different from the arcade and home video games Robinett was familiar with: it featured a vast world to be explored, treasures to be collected, puzzles to be solved, enemies to be vanquished and a quest to be accomplished. Robinett's ambition was to adapt *Adventure* to his employer's platform: the Atari VCS.

Jesper Juul distinguishes two extremes when adapting a game to a different context (2005). On one end, the "port" is a quasi-identical reimplementation of an existing game to a new platform. On the other, an "adaptation" *per se* entails a significant divergence in experience between the two versions. A typical example is the sports adaptation: although playing the *NHL Hockey* franchise (Electronic Arts) on a video-game console evokes many aspects of the original game, there is obviously an immense gap between the embodied feeling of skating on ice and pushing buttons on a gamepad. In a game adaptation, something new is created.

Although the PDP-10 mainframe on which the original *Adventure* ran and the Atari VCS were both technically computers, the differences between the two were far from trivial. First, the home console was comparatively a very underpowered machine. The Atari VCS cartridges could store no more than 4kB of information whereas the original text game required over 100kB. The two platforms also had very different interaction modalities. *Adventure* was designed assuming a keyboard as input device and a text-focused output device (either a printer or a screen). On the other hand, the Atari VCS had been engineered to play *PONG* (Atari, 1972) or *Combat* (Atari, 1977) (Montfort & Bogost, 2009) and relied on joystick input and the display of simple moving objects. It had no native text display support; any characters on screen implied the manual repurposing of visual elements. Robinett's project would entail significant creativity and his adaptation would highlight the differences between computers and consoles as gaming platforms at the time.

Extending the Playfield

The world of the original *Adventure* is modeled as an arbitrary network of discrete nodes ("rooms") represented as textual descriptions (Lessard, 2013) such as: "You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building." Moving from one place to the other entailed typing simple instructions such as "go north" or "enter house" which would take the player to a new location. In contrast, all home console and arcade games of the time took place on a single-screen "playfield" (as per VCS terminology). However, dynamic objects could move *within* this playfield whereas in *Adventure*, one is either in a room or not, and movement happens *in-between* places.

Robinett's proposition would be to do both things at once: combining continuous *and* discrete space. In Atari's *Adventure*, a single room is represented on the screen as a maze of walls. The player can navigate this space by maneuvering a representation of themselves (a square) with the joystick, as was typical in Atari games at that time. When coming in contact with an opening on the sides of the screen, the player-character is transported to another room (understood as being adjacent). This division of game space across multiple discrete screens combining both *within* and *in-between* movements would become a staple of action-adventure games as later seen in the early *Ultima* (Origin Systems, 1981) or *Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) series.

Interacting with Objects

A key element of the original *Adventure*'s gameplay is solving problems by using objects. For example, one needs to fill a bottle and water a plant so that a beanstalk can grow. These operations are also undertaken via textual commands such as: "take bottle", "fill bottle" and "water plant". In Atari games, player input takes the form of either directions (moving the joystick) or pressing a button. Typically, these translate to moving some objects on the screen and firing missiles. The main modality through which video-game objects interact is through collision detection (Montfort & Bogost, 2009): hitting the ball in *PONG* boils down to making sure your paddle touches the ball; you score a point in *Combat* when your bullet touches the opponent's tank. The importance of this modality is evidenced by the specific programming affordances provided by the Atari VCS hardware to identify these collisions.

In the Atari *Adventure*, the player takes an object (visually represented on screen) by touching it with the player-character. Although Robinett toyed with the idea of allowing an inventory with multiple objects (as is the case in his model game), he decided to keep things simple and allowed only one item to be held at a time (Robinett, 2015), something he could clearly convey by displaying the object next to the player-character as it moves around. Object-to-object interaction is triggered by colliding with a second visual element while holding an object. The typical example of this is colliding with a closed door while holding the right key. This simple interaction scheme will also be widely imitated. One still picks up a gun by running into it in modern Triple-A first-person shooter games.

Putting the Action in *Adventure*

The treatment of enemies is a main point of divergence between the two *Adventures*. While the original model did feature evil dwarves, a bear, a dragon, and a pirate, these were approached with the usual turn-by-turn textual commands and did not lead to high-intensity confrontations. The dragon, for instance, is dealt with in this incongruous manner:

> > kill dragon
> With what? Your bare hands?
> > yes
> Congratulations! You have just vanquished a dragon with your bare hands!
>
> (Unbelievable, isn't it?)