

## **GCL'14 Course: Intermediate Media and Game Studies**

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### **Essay: Do we need a gaming (r)evolution?**

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#### **Introduction:**

We are in a need of a further development between the relationship of developers and gamers. This relationship should be taken to the next level where the established bound between developers and consumers will dissolve, whereas both parties will establish a better understanding and learn from each other to reel the technological state.

New ways of communication take players a step further to the developers. During the glory times of the arcade machines, the player could only talk to friends and other players about the game they played and read the journalist's game reviews in the magazines. They also could write some letters to the developers, but didn't always get answers. Today the way of communication is way easier, anonymous and the feedback of the player can be more or less superficial or professional.

The new types of communication have undergone a state of development since the internet was made available for the public and are very popular these days by the app stores. It is now possible to interact with the developers directly and tell them your opinion to the game. Anonymity plays a decisive role in this new rating system. A player can say his opinion about errors or any other problems about the game unrestrained and also sometimes ignore the etiquette.

Especially interesting are the negative ratings for free games, with the Free To Play model as a representative. Consumers take the right to condemn a product as if someone has stolen some precious food from their plate. Another negative example lies in the abusive nature of the rating systems, where competing enterprises take the right to rate a product low in favour of their own, because there is a possibility that this product can be a serious rival in the future. Nevertheless, the advantages should also be mentioned here. Beside the referred direct communication way, which is in most cases constructive, the rating system will give a brief overview about the average player opinion, which is also worth a lot of research time for the developers.

How does this mostly brief relationship between developers and players justify itself nowadays? Are we already on the climax of the developers / players communication? Will there be an evolution of the relationship or even the medium "game"? The possible answers to these questions will be handled in this essay. There will also be an attempt to find new ways of communications between players and developers.

## What is evolution?

The classical description of the evolution according to Wikipedia [1] says that the inheritable characteristics of a population of living beings changes from generation to generation. Through direct or random mutations, new characteristics can be formed, which can be inherited to the next generation themselves. These characteristics can with a higher or lower likelihood be transmitted by natural selection (different survival and reproductive rates) to the descendants. The theory of the evolution by natural selection was illustrated for the first time by Charles Darwin in his book "The Origin of Species" in 1959.

The concept of the "Survival of the Fittest" according to Wikipedia [2] means, for the purposes of the Darwinian theory of evolution, the survival of the individuals who have adapted themselves best. Fitness in the Darwinian sense describes the degree of the adaptation to the environment or also the reproductive ability in spite of low specialisation. This means that not the kind of individual survives, which resists all risks and edges out other kinds, but those which adapt themselves either to the environment or have a high reproductive rate at risky environmental states.

According to Wikipedia [3], in general, in the classical theory of evolution, that has been used in nature science and culture history, the development to a higher integrated complex form in physical-chemical, in biological and cultural aspects is given.

How can this classical theory be referred to digital games? The circumstances of the survival of a game, is it economic or through media coverage should serve as an example. Nowadays in the eternal fight for the attention of the player or the press, a "natural" selection of digital games also takes place. The "fitness" of a game, it's adaptation to the mainstream, is the selection factor of today's digital games. Mutations in form of experimental genre mixes like "Flappy Bird" or new game concepts like "Journey" are adapted well to their niche, but other developers struggle to not create mainstream games and use known concepts. The economic pressure seems to be the most decisive factor, however, one shouldn't underestimate the role of the gamer, which is the consumer and the substrate of the industry. As with the courting play of the peacock, who tries to impress his future partner with his splendid plumage, the developer also tries to court the favour of the gamer with his work. Besides, the plumage doesn't need to be in form of high-end graphics, but can also be an ingenious storyline as well as an unusual gameplay. As well as with the biological evolution where today's kinds arose from a common ancestor, the diversity of games genres also arose from some less concepts, which are more or less taken from natural sources.

## **The evolution of games. A retrospective.**

Meshable [4] offers a good summarized overview of the gaming evolution. Since the first documented computer game "Noughts and Crosses" of the Cambridge University from 1952 has been developed, the game industry grows rapidly. Also by the invention of more efficient micro-processors and by the better accessibility to the public. The first games were only available in institutes and created for research purposes and as by-products of other science projects. War simulations like "hat play" were developed in 1955 and sports simulations like "Tennis for Two", in 1958. With "Spacewars" another big puzzle piece of the game history was developed in 1962. At this time these games and simulations had been still ran by big machines and hardware. Nevertheless, this should change in the future. With "Computer Space", in 1971 the first commercial arcade game was shipped. A year later followed the Magnavox Odyssey as the first home console that initiated the beginning of the home consoles era. Atari set new standards for home consoles with the "Atari 2600" in 1977 and dominated the market. With the publication of "Pac-Man", in 1980 which was the best-selling game of that time, games succeeded in reaching a wide audience. With the debut of Donkey Kong in 1981, Nintendo steps into the young games industry and with the image of Jumpman a decisive marketing factor was introduced. In 1985 Nintendo introduced the NES and contributed to the rescue of the ailing industry. With the advancement of the hardware technology, the home consoles also developed. In 1991 the 16 bits consoles Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis became the popular money-spinner. From now on new icons like Zelda, Donkey Kong and Sonic (1989) should become the representative faces of the enterprises. In 1995 the era of 32 bit systems started. Sony introduced his revolutionary Playstation which allowed highly competitive and cheaper products with 3D graphics and CDs. Nintendo 64 offered 64 bits and also 3D games. With the Xbox, Microsoft steps into the console world in 2001. With the Nintendo Wii a new console experience which animated the players to more active movement was introduced. With the opening of the Apple app stores in 2008 new possibilities for the gaming market were established. Now mobile gaming with social aspects was more demanded than ever. Since this time the borders between developers and consumers became narrower. The social aspects shouldn't be only used by mobile devices but also in consoles and thus were introduced by the PS4 (2013). Besides, cross platforming became popular. In 2014 Oculus Rift was introduced as a successor of the VR technologies from the 90s but with more efficient hardware.

The relationship between developers and players has changed. Back then players have gone to the arcade hall and had talked to their friends about the games. With the introduction of the home consoles this social component somehow went to the background, because now, players could also enjoy playing solo on their home console. With the introduction of the Internet, the multiplayer aspect in the games raises again and the social component got more attention. Shorter communication ways with the developers or representatives (like game masters) also became possible. With the introduction of mobile gaming, the direct communication with the developers has received another push. Now faster than before players could provide direct feedback to the developers. With the introduction of the new VR technology the possibility to meet the developers as digital beings will become realistic. Also the chance will be provided, where the players can participate actively in the development of the game themselves.

## What is play?

Before we talk further about the player / developer relationship, we should try to understand and define the term "Play" for the purpose of this essay.

In his book „Homo Ludens“ which was written in 1938 [5], Johan Huizinga wrote, that play is a free activity, that has no material interest, takes place in its own space and time (magic circle) and can build up social groups. Roger Caillois agreed in his book “Man, Play and Games” 1957 [6] with some of Huizinga’s definitions about play. For Caillois, play also doesn’t has material interest or create goods. Games are free activities and will be hold when the player has the desire to play. Play will also take place in a system that is regulated by rules. Caillois also defines games in 4 categories. According to his theory games can be based on agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation) orilinx (vertigo).

In general regarding classical theories, play is a free activity which takes place in a separate space / time from the real world and has no material interest. Today these theories may be the case partially, not least by the technological progress. However, it should be mentioned that through the VR technology a fusion of play and reality will happen in future (regarding the magic circle) and also with e-sport and social games like Second Life the component of the material interest nowadays does not apply. Today the categorisation of games in 4 areas also does not apply. There is more a mixing of all categories in the different genres, however, no game only has one category completely represented.

Play itself can not only be seen as a human activity. Animals also play in nature. They adapt themselves to their environment with play to learn important behavioral patterns, that will let them survive. They simulate real situations, but without real consequences, like beeing in the magic circle.

## **Digital Games and their influence.**

Through the software from today, users are provided with tools that can let them create games for themselves without professional knowledge. This was not possible in the past. Big companies and professionals had the privilege to create games and were the pioneers of the industry.

A motley collection of different genres was set up during the years. Some of them more some of them less successful. Competition games are still the best-seller. Through the mentioned software, novices today can create their own project and publish it. The indie branch was born that way and provided new experimental concepts.

Digital games have received a significant value in our today's society, not least because of their economic value, but also because of their innovative nature to create new concepts and their accessibility. Digital games have developed with the time. They are not only direct simulations of analogous games but also set new standards. Nevertheless, the downside of the economic efficiency opposes the development of new experimental concepts. It is too risky for big companies to try whole new concepts. The Indie area is more adaptable here, because by less financial risks new concepts can reach to the public. It only becomes problematic when there is a saturation of a current genre if a new concept has proven a market suitability. There will be a flood of new copies of these games. Innovations are always possible, but nevertheless the players must also accept them. Nevertheless, this happens mostly automatically when developers adapt their work and use known elements and introduce new ones in the same game.

Digital games have a determining influence on the economy and contribute to the innovation in the digital world. Besides, new concepts should also be accepted as efficient as already proven ones to provide more efficient progress of the industry.

## **Are alternative games also games?**

If one speaks of digital games, new game genres shouldn't be forgotten. Serious Games, Newsgames, Advergames and education games are such examples. They do not correspond to the picture of a classical game and have their own niche. In spite of these concepts sometimes lack fun, which is an essential component often mentioned by players, they could already prove their value for the gaming industry.

## **New perspective on games**

What will happen with digital games in the future? New genre already emerged and the step in a VR future is already set. Will our understanding of play thereby change? It is possible. With the VR technology we can experience more realistic games. The game will return a little bit more to the natural area, where we as individuals will understand ourselves better and transcend. Also the games itself will be rooted better in the aspects of our society, because new possibilities of the communication and also more realistic simulations of everyday works will be possible. However, until we arrive at this state, players and developers has to develeop themselves.

## **The relationship between developers and gamers, now and then**

As already mentioned, in the beginning of the establishment of the gaming industry, less communication between players and developers was possible and with the accessibility of the Internet to the public, this communication was refined and a direct exchange was possibly. Today the exchange takes place by the app stores and via social media. Players can express their opinion very fast and efficiently and give the developers direct feedback or let the community vote about the feedback (e.g. via YouTube). The far-reaching spread of opinions is also accompanied by a bitter taste, so that also games will make full bad ratings when only parts of the game do not hit their personal taste. Developers themselves also now have the possiblity to communicate with their target groups. They can exert direct influence on their opinion if they include the players opinions directly during the development. However, players can also swap sides during play of e.g. sandbox games or use level editors. They will be able to take the role of a developer themselves, even when using the developers tools. They can also participate in the development that way.

## **We need an evolution of gamers**

At the moment a part development of the player community takes place. By the use of new media, it becomes possible to influence the process of a development or the manipulation of public opinion, faster and as already described more extensively. YouTuber or Twitch-Streamer with their Let's Plays mediate their opinion to their audience live or in short time frames. Those players are part of a new generation that will participate in the development of games more intensively. The feedback they provide will be taken seriously by the developers. If this trend will continue, then it is not impossible that the players from today will be the supporting developers from tomorrow. This development has to be supported, because the players themselves deal with the mechanisms of the development and learn to appreciate the value of the product better.

## **The need for better rating systems (appstores, websites etc.)**

Today's communication forms and ranking systems have appeared as a quick alternative to send feedback. A review is quick and comfortable. This rating system has the advantage of a quick rating, but can also have a great disadvantage. Whole games can be rated by just a simple Like / Unlike system. Thus it can happen, that the small bad aspects of a game can overshadow the major good aspects of a game, because the player don't like them. This will worsen the overall picture of the game.

To accelerate an advancement in the gaming industry, we need better rating systems that cover all aspects of a game. Therefore the rating system will need a content and technical division so that the player will provide better feedback about the problems that occurred during his gaming. This feedback would be more efficient than the superficial current rating systems and will also help the developers to find weak points in their game. This process would be some kind of co-evolution and is to be appreciated.

## **Responsibility of big studios**

The responsibility of an advancement in the gaming industry is not only the responsibility of the gamers. All participants including developers and players are equally responsible to participate in the process. Big gaming studios have the capabilities to invent and implement new experimental gaming concepts that will advance the medium, but sometimes rely too much on old well-established concepts. New technologies are used to improve the visual and auditory quality, but the gameplay will fall by the wayside. Big development studios should risk the step and invent new experimental and innovative concepts and not only provide their audience the same concepts just with a new packaging.

## **Responsibility of indie studios**

Indie studios in comparison to big studios have the advantage to have low financial risk and therefore can use new experimental concepts. However, this advantage is not always perceived and thus some studios trudge in the footsteps of big studios and keep the tradition of main stream games alive. Indie studios should try to develop alternative and experimental games. One can even add the exploitation of the nostalgia effect by producing the remake of XY or the spiritual successor. If a new concept has proven its market value, they, and also individuals shouldn't jump up on the train of copycats and remain loyal to themselves, even if this means that the player doesn't agree with the end product.

## **Responsibility of gamers**

The player also has a big responsibility with the advancement. As mentioned he is the substrate of the industry and can decide over victory or defeat of a game. Some players are not aware of this responsibility and neglect this in the already mentioned rating systems. Players should take the time to understand why a game was developed and not condemn the game with the first problem that occurs. They also should always try something new and not solely rely on established concepts. The development of the player from consumer to a developer support should take place.



## Conclusion

In the classical theory of evolution, that has been used in nature science and culture history, the development to a higher integrated complex form in physical-chemical, in biological and cultural aspects is given.

Through the development of better technologies, the games industry established to a determining innovative factor.

The natural play is a voluntary activity of the animal, as well as human world and serves the early development of the individual.

Digital plays take up an aspect of this development. Games in our current society are still seen as an entertainment product, however, the future will provide us with more. New aspects will be created, so that players themselves can become developers and also a fusion of the real world with digital world will take place by the advancing VR technology.

Finally, I conclude with this essay that we really need a Gaming (r)evolution. Developers and players must develop in favour of the advancement of the medium play. Developers must create new concepts and improve old ones and players must accept these new concepts. By involving players into the development process of a game, the players realise their role as a driving force in the gaming industry and will learn to estimate the games better. The improvement of the current rating systems can be a catalytic effect of the development of the industry. By the VR technology the gap between developer and players will be closed. In the end, we are all players and we should follow our instinct of the eternal play, the discovery of new things, the development of the personality and the growth of the cultural property.

## References:

- [1] <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution>
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- [6] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play Games*, chapters 1 and 2
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