

A Co-operative Study of Transnational European Histories of Videogames

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the latest findings on the histories of videogames around Europe from the Cooperation of Science and Technology funded 'Grassroots of Digital Europe' (GRADE) project. The GRADE project, commenced in November 2022 with completion in October 2026, seeks to map the historical influences of creative computing from the 1970s through to the current European Digital Decade (2020-2030). The focus of one of the first workstreams of the project, due to be completed in April 2023, is to survey, collect, collate and archive academic papers written over the past 40 years in the arena of videogames and creative computing which have been previously overlooked, omitted or forgotten, thus forging an up-to-date account of the current state of the art of the histories of videogames across the European continent. Its medium term aim is to unveil these hidden narratives and themes between, across and in contrast with European countries, especially those of women and global majorities. This paper, drawing on the focus of the project, will provide breaking findings from the study, the methods used to gather the data (e.g. surveys, lit reviews, bibliographic tools used for collation and sharing) and challenges encountered to provide insight and guidance to further research in the local, regional, national and international milieu.

One of the key reasons for the omission of this literature from contemporary games histories studies is that the much of the literature lies at the limits and margins of the current state of the art of videogame research, often within liminal spaces. Liminality is understood as oscillation between established and new modes of thinking, directly reflecting the limits and margins of the key theme of DiGRA 2023. Liminality is typical of European histories of videogames where technological advancements in creative computing could be seen to complement (Gazzard 2016) counter (Švelch 2018) and co-exist (Meades 2022) with existing political economies - and often with all three - in the same time and space. This is instructive of Van Gennep's (1960) identification with the three distinct phases of liminality: separation from an earlier fixed point; transition or passage; incorporation and realignment with a new role. Orientation of the margins and limits of the current state of the art of videogame and creative computing within the theoretical framework of liminality permits a movement towards realigning the European Digital Decade through a greater appreciation of its grassroots movements and economic, political, cultural and technological antecedents.

Like all threshold processes, this should be ideally experienced as a gradual, reflective, process (such as moving through primary, secondary and tertiary education) allowing for movement between different planes. Yet the revolutionary nature of this then new technology did not always permit a smooth transition between users, communities and cultures in and around grassroots movements of

creative computing. Indeed, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the playfulness inherent in the creative computing of videogames including cultures of hacking and the demoscene (Wasiak 2014) the positioning of creative computing from the 1970s to the advent of the commercial Internet (circa mid-1990s) at the limits or the margins of technology and society generated ‘an alternative or ‘space’ outside of the system’ marked by an ‘outsider and insider oppositional playground’ (Alberts and Oldenziel 2014, 3), which was not always consistently documented outside of the hedonistic joy of creating a game, hack or demo, purely for its own sake. This is especially the case where approaches and use of videogames and creative computing differed so much across local, regional, national, international and transnational locations via the dynamics of ‘local games histories’ (Swalwell 2021). This presentation seeks to address these gaps in the literature.

These dynamics, for instance where British hardware was used to develop counter-culture software to communist influence in Czechia, inflect the margins where design intention meets practical application. At these socio-political limits, ‘conflicts and resolutions are a historian’s chance to glimpse into relationships that otherwise remain out of sight’ (Tatarchenko 2016, 201). Mobilising this ideal, this paper, through its unique position of incorporating a trans-disciplinary group from grassroots movements, curators and archivists and scholars from disciplines including sociology, international politics, media studies and cultural studies will provide insight into the current state of the art of European scholarship on the historical development of videogames across the European continent. It will provide indicative themes and attempt to broach the limits of the hidden narratives written by those at the margins of game histories, including, but not limited to, women, global majorities and those from LGBTQI+ backgrounds (Shaw et al, 2019) where these accounts have been omitted, overlooked and forgotten.

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