

Between Punches and Flying Attacks: Ludonarrative Imaginaries in 1980s Beat 'em Up Games

Emmanoel Ferreira

Universidade Federal Fluminense
Rua Professor Marcos Waldemar de Freitas Reis S/N – IACS
24210-201, Niterói, RJ, Brazil
emmanoelf@id.uff.br

Víctor Navarro-Remesal

TecnoCampus, Universitat Pompeu Fabra
C/Castaños 131 3 2
08302, Mataró, Spain
vnavarro@tecnocampus.cat

INTRODUCTION

It can be said that *Double Dragon*, developed by Yoshihisa Kishimoto, was one of the first games to consolidate the genre known as the beat 'em up, whose gameplay consists of side-scrolling melee combat, sometimes involving short-range weapons. However, it was not the pioneer of the genre. This credit is generally attributed to *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* (1986), known in the West as *Renegade*, also developed by Yoshihisa Kishimoto. The title inaugurated the Kunio-kun series (known as *River City* in the West), with more than 50 releases across multiple platforms.

Beyond the titles mentioned above, others achieved great success, such as *Final Fight* (Capcom 1989), *River City Ransom* (Technos Japan 1989), and *Streets of Rage* (SEGA 1991). The large number of beat 'em ups released during this period, often with similar themes and gameplay, raises certain questions:

- i) What cultural and social imaginaries of the time contributed to the dissemination of this genre?
- ii) What intermedial influences – particularly from film – shaped the development of these games?

To discuss and explore answers to these questions, this article draws on Óliver Pérez Latorre's (2023) concept of ludonarrative imaginary, as well as Cornelius Castoriadis's (2013) concept of social imaginary. Both concepts help frame the (trans)medial and social relationships between video game productions and other narrative media, especially film, in the 1980s.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

LUDONARRATIVE IMAGINARIES AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

Óliver Pérez Latorre (2023) introduces the concept of *ludonarrative imaginary* to better understand how videogame productions relate to the contexts in which they are conceived and developed. According to Latorre, the concept refers to the “liminal space where the meanings of play, videogames, and literary and audiovisual fiction converge with the social imaginary” (Latorre 2023, 5). This means audiovisual and videogame productions should not be understood in isolation, but rather situated within historically defined social and cultural contexts. Moreover, such contexts should not be framed in terms of a dichotomy between the real and the fictional, but instead by conceiving the imaginary as a dimension of reality itself—“whether psychic, social, or in a transversal sense between the two” (Latorre 2023, 5). This perspective embraces history beyond its factual, objective aspects and foregrounding the imaginary as an operator through which subjects make sense of the world.

Regarding the concept of social imaginary, Latorre defines it, drawing on Castoriadis, as:

An amalgam of representations of the world and imaginary significations, shared by a given social group, which partly reflects society and partly contributes to its construction and transformation, where mental models intertwine with affective dispositions, and which exists in a state of constant tension and mutation. (Latorre 2023, 6)

Ludonarrative imaginaries – where videogames, cinema, TV series, comics, and literature are situated – are therefore embedded “within” social imaginaries, influencing and being influenced by them. There is, accordingly, a certain porosity between these two spheres, operating through a dynamic feedback loop (Fig. 1).

LUDONARRATIVE AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES OF THE 1980S

This work seeks to situate the ludonarrative and social imaginaries of the 1980s, particularly regarding urban violence in the United States, in two ways:

- i) how such issues were perceived both by Americans and by Japanese observers; and, as a consequence,
- ii) how these imaginaries shaped audiovisual and video-ludic productions of the period.

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by high levels of violence in major U.S. cities. The year 1980 saw the highest number of criminal incidents in New York City’s history (Ferullo 2020), with a homicide rate three times higher than in 2020. These numbers would only begin to decline in the early 1990s, dropping steadily thereafter (Ferullo 2020).

Given this reality, it is unsurprising that the North American – and global – social imaginary, within a mediatized society (Hjarvard 2014), began to associate major U.S. metropolises such as New York with urban violence. As Castoriadis (2013, 556–557) states: “The institution of society is at each moment the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations (...) Society brings into existence a world of

significations, and it exists only in reference to that world.” Reality and social imaginary thus enter a constant process of mutual reinforcement, generating an amalgam that persists for years—or decades.

Consequently, socio-discursive contexts embedded in the social imaginary feed into ludonarrative imaginaries (Latorre 2023). It is no coincidence that the 1970s–1980s saw a growth in audiovisual productions – especially cinema – addressing urban violence in major U.S. cities. Films such as *Death Wish*, *The Warriors*, and *Streets of Fire* are examples.

However, one question remains: Why were such games produced primarily by Japanese developers rather than American ones? One possible path toward answering this lies in the intermedial relationship between the Japanese game industry and Hollywood cinema of the time. According to Zanotti (2018), this relationship rests on at least two aspects:

- i) the very low crime rates in Japan during the 1980s, which – by contrast – may have fostered a certain fascination with U.S. social and ludonarrative imaginaries; and
- ii) the considerable success of Hollywood productions in Japan during the same period. Moreover, this success was not limited to box-office performance, but also strengthened by the rapid availability of these films on VHS, which increased access.

This intermedial relationship between cinema and games is clearly observable in titles such as *Double Dragon* (Technos Japan 1987), *Final Fight* (Capcom 1989), and *Streets of Rage* (SEGA 1991), all developed and published by Japanese studios. All three portray U.S. cities overtaken by crime and street gangs, and the player-controlled character embarks on a solitary (or sometimes cooperative) mission to eliminate gang members and restore order – common tropes of the cinematic productions mentioned earlier.

This work examines how social and ludonarrative imaginaries shaped 1980s beat ‘em ups through intermedial ties to film. The overarching argument is that these games did not emerge “by chance,” but through the appropriation of ludonarrative social imaginaries surrounding everyday life in major U.S. metropolises during the 1970s–1980s.

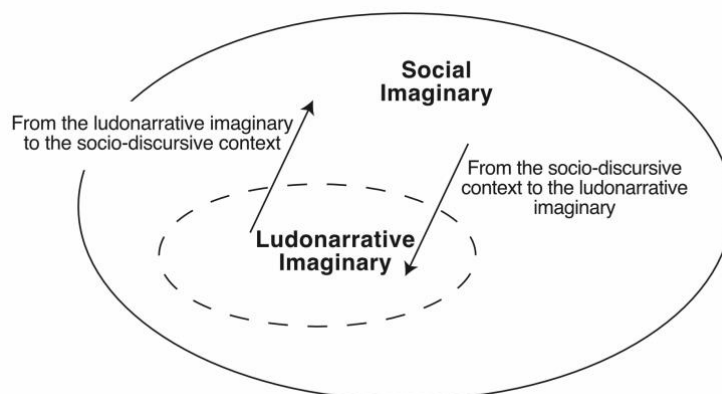


Figure 1: Diagram of the relationships between the social and the ludonarrative imaginaries.

Source: Adapted from Latorre (2023)

REFERENCES

- Capcom. 1989. *Final Fight*. Arcade. Osaka, Japan: Capcom.
- Castoriadis, C. 2013. *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad*. Barcelona: Tusquets.
- Ferullo, J. 2020. Ghosts of the 70s: 'Fear City,' assumptions about crime and defunding police. *The Hill*, Aug. 2, 2020. Available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/criminal-justice/510168-ghosts-of-the-70s-fear-city-assumptions-about-crime-and-defunding/>. Last access: 06/12/2025.
- Hjarvard, S. 2014. *A midiatização da cultura e da sociedade*. São Leopoldo: Ed. UNISINOS.
- Latorre, Ó. P. 2023. *Imaginarios ludonarrativos: Análisis intertextual de juegos, videojuegos y ficción audiovisual*.
- Technos Japan. 1986. *Nekketsu Koha Kunio-kun*. Arcade. Tokyo, Japan: Technos Japan.
- Technos Japan. 1987. *Double Dragon*. Arcade. Tokyo, Japan: Technos Japan.
- Technos Japan. 1989. *River City Ransom*. NES. Tokyo, Japan: Technos Japan.
- SEGA. 1991. *Streets of Rage*. SEGA Genesis. Tokyo, Japan, SEGA.
- ZAnotti, P. 2018. Playing the (International) Movie): Intermediality and the Appropriation of Symbolic Capital in Final Fight and The Beat 'em up Genre. *Eludamos: Journal of Computer Game Culture*. Vol. 9, No. 1.