Book Review

Understanding Games and the Industry that Produces Them: A Review of the Edited Volume *The Video Game Industry*

Chris J. Young

Peter Zackariasson & Timothy L. Wilson (Eds.). *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. New York: Routledge, 2012, 268 pp., ISBN NO.9780415896528

Published as part of Routledge Studies in Innovation, Organization and Technology (RIOT!), *The Video Game Industry*, edited by Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson, provides a predominantly technological and economic perspective on the video game industry in North America and Europe. As the title of this book review suggests, the aim of this volume was to "understand video games and the industry that produces them" (Wilson & Zackariasson, 2012c, p. 259). To achieve this aim, the volume was broken into four parts: "The Nature of the Industry" as a distinct industry bordering the software and cultural industries; "Geographical Comparisons" between North America and European video game industries; the technological, ecological, and societal "Effects of the Industry;" and "The Future" of the industry in the years to come. *The Video Game Industry* provides a must-read overview for scholars researching the video game industry, covering topics that range from the industry as a subculture (Dymek, 2012) to the ecological impact of the industry (Maxwell & Miller, 2012) to the localized development of regional industries (Kerr, 2012; O'Donnell, 2012b; Sandqvist, 2012). However, the edited volume does exclude some important topics, such as the Japanese industry, gender and misogyny within the industry, and the contributions of non-triple-A forms of game making, for scholars researching those fields.

Author Biography

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The volume's introduction summarizes the formation and development of the videogame industry to the present, identifying and defining: dominant structures and participants (developers, publishers, distributors, retailers, customers, consumers, intellectual property-owners, platform owners, and hardware owners); video games, borrowing from Jesper Juul's (2006) *Half-Real* (***1***); and video game production (development stages, developer structures, and developers). This introduction offers readers a vocabulary to contextualize the various stakeholders featured in each of the volume's subsequent chapters. Scholars unfamiliar with the video game industry can acquire familiarity with the industry's terminology and formation from this introductory chapter.

The first section, "The Nature of the Industry," defines the video game industry and its relation to the software and cultural industries. Casey O'Donnell's (2012a) chapter, "This Is Not a Software Industry," examined how the video games industry, though rooted in software development historically, has matured into a content-based cultural industry built on creative collaborative works that are infused with culture and have broad cultural implications. However, this chapter does not address the built-in tools that many video games are now released with that allow players to develop their own user-generated content, much like software tools do. While I agree the video game industry is distinct from the software industry, the video game industry has appropriated its software development history for the purposes of tailoring tools and content for its player audiences. In his chapter, "Video Games—A Subcultural Industry," Mikolaj Dymek (2012) critiqued the "infinite expansion narrative" that says the video game industry has moved on from its more subcultural roots into a mass-cultural "casual revolution" with games for every type of player. He argued, instead, that "the video game industry is a subcultural industry and produces subcultural content for a subcultural audience within a subcultural industry logic" (Dymek, 2012, p. 36). Readers who are familiar with some of the recent "cultural" controversies within the video game industry—such as #gamergate, the underrepresentation of gender and ethnic minorities in the industry, and the hyper-sexualized representation of women in video games—will find this chapter particularly useful as it contends that "the overreliance on this subculture hampers true development of the video game medium" (Dymek, 2012, p. 49). In other words, the video game industry is not a mass culture, *yet*. Zackariasson and Wilson (2012b) in their chapter, "Marketing of Video Games," maintained that, despite the perception that the video game industry has been primarily a creative industry, industry marketing efforts follow a traditional and uncreative pattern. While Zackariasson and Wilson (2012b) also provided examples of non-traditional video game marketing, such as when *Halo 2* was promoted using an Alternative Reality Game creating a novel and interactive marketing strategy, their analysis could have provided a cross-comparison with other cultural and creative industries. Such a comparison would have emphasized how traditional and uncreative video game industry marketing is. In "An Exploration of the Mobile Gaming Ecosystem from Developers' Perspective," Claudio Feijoó (2012) situated mobile game publishing within the larger ecosystem of mobile app publishing and argued that "the growth of the mobile gaming market in the next years will be fundamentally based on the increasing availability and affordability of new mobile devices, and smartphones in particular" (p. 88–89). While Feijoó (2012) provided a detailed technological and economic overview of the formation and development of mobile game publishing across multiple platforms, the chapter could have provided some analysis on how traditional video game publishers have adapted to the mobile publishing ecosystem and how new video game publishers and studios have developed because of the mobile publishing ecosystem.

The second section, "Geographical Comparisons," is the strongest section of the edited volume. "Geographical Comparisons" provides an overview of the North American and European video

game industries, focusing on the United States, United Kingdom and Ireland, and Sweden in particular. O'Donnell (2012b) contributed a second chapter to this volume, "The North American Game Industry," wherein he summarized its history, the console manufacturers, studios, publishers, middleware, representative organizations, and the rise of the "indies," while having paid particular attention to the industry's demographics and work and labour issues, such as the work "crunch" and "Quality of Life." In her chapter, "The UK and Irish Game Industries," Aphra Kerr (2012) outlined the history of the United Kingdom and Ireland's video game industries within the context of being small players in the global video game industry. Kerr argued that while there have been an issue of labour shortages, an issue of the relevance and quality of educational courses, and a perceived need for state support, the most pressing issue has been the industry-wide problem of attracting and retaining experienced staff. Ulf Sandqvist's (2012) chapter, "The Development of the Swedish Game Industry: A True Success Story?" described the history and development of the Swedish video game industry, noting that while Sweden has had a relatively large game development community, they have had very few local publishing companies, leaving the industry susceptible to giving up their rights to intellectual properties and, ultimately, control over the process of game development to foreign publishers. It is especially interesting to read how the Swedish video game industry has essentially become a satellite industry for some of the larger publishers from the United States and Japan for developing triple-A games, particularly how susceptible the Swedish industry is to the ebb and flow of global industry trends.

The third section, "Effects of the Industry," explores the technological, ecological, and societal effects of the industry. Mirko Ernkvist's (2012) chapter, "Console Hardware: The Development of Nintendo Wii", discussed how the marketing, organizational structure, and development process of the Nintendo Wii was inherently shaped by the historical origin of Nintendo's cognitive frame that facilitated the exploration and selection of discontinuous product attributes for the video game console, such as the Nintendo Wii remote. Ernkvist's (2012) analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, including retrospective oral histories with Nintendo personnel and publically released documentation from Nintendo, provided a framework for future historical studies of publishers and studios in the video game industry. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's (2012) chapter, "'Warm and Stuffy': The Ecological Impact of Electronic games," stands out in this edited volume when they call for games studies scholars "to account for the impact of its beloved industry's inputs from the earth, extracted via mining and drilling, and outputs into the earth, such as emissions into air, land and water" (p. 189). Their ecological approach to analyzing the materiality of games as objects within a development process that stretches long before and well after the traditional sense of game development—game concept in a studio to consumer distribution—provides a critical perspective missing from most game studies research on the industry. Flavio Escribano (2012) in his chapter, "Gamification as the Post-Modern Phalanstère: Is the Gamification Playing with Us or Are We Playing with Gamification?" looked at the concept of gamification and how it has become embedded in our daily life, laying the ground to playing without leisure and playing at work. Escribano (2012) critiqued the pervasiveness of games in everyday life, and in particular gamification, having argued, "We do not need more game, we do not need more stimuli, we need more time outs to use our minds to breath life in our games and our stimuli" (p. 216). Escribano's (2012) analysis of gamification provides an interesting perspective on how games have infiltrated traditionally non-gaming devices, such as cell phones, and everyday activities, consequently blurring our notions of work and leisure activities.

The final section, "The Future," imagines possible directions the video games industry might take in the coming years based off developments as of 2012. In their chapter, "The Evolving European Video Game Software Ecosystem," Giuditta de Prato, Sven Lindmark, and Jean-Paul Simon (2012) analyzed governmental and industry reports to determine the state and future trends of the European video game industry to identify EU-level industrial policy-making at the levels of game development, publishing, middleware development, distributors and retailers, market structure, and the distribution of value. Their analysis provides an interesting perspective on the future of the European video game industry as their data reveal a global industry dominated by the United States and Japan in game developers, publishing, and middleware development. However, their chapter does not include an analysis of the European industries' impact on the manufacturing of video game hardware and physical game discs. Zackariasson and Wilson's (2012c) final chapter, "Through the Looking Glass Sharply," synthesized their contributors' perspectives on the future of the video game industry, while providing their own thoughts on the future of consoles, the competitive situation for publishers, and the market in evolving economies. This chapter provides a fascinating conclusion to *The Video Game Industry* as it presents the authors' concerns on the current sustainability of the video game industry, reflecting both their respective fields of research and theoretical lens.

While *The Video Game Industry* provides a thorough overview of the technological and economic history of the industry in North America and Europe and touches upon its subcultural roots and its social and ecological impacts, the volume omits several topics of video game industry research in its scope. Throughout the text, there are geographical and national comparisons made without a chapter or serious discussion of one of the video game industry's biggest players—Japan (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003; Consalvo, 2009; Izushi & Aoyama, 2006). Most of the discussion on the Japanese video game industry (or other global industries) is in relation to their impact on the North American or European industries. One need only look at tables 11.1 and 11.2 in *The Video Game Industry* to see how Japan dominates the top 50 developers and top 20 game publishers worldwide. Another area of research excluded from the edited volume is the ways in which gender stereotyping has influenced the types of games produced; the scantily clad "booth babes," whose sex appeal is used to promote games at trade shows; and the underrepresentation of minority genders and ethnicities in industry roles outside of marketing and secretarial work (Kafai, Heete, Denner, & Sun, 2008). A final area that is absent from discussion throughout is the influence and contributions of hobbyists and modders to the wider video game industry (Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2007). The volume takes a predominantly professionalized, triple-A approach to the video game industry, which limits a more holistic discussion of the various communities that produce video games. While "indies," homebrew, and hobbyist game developers have considerably expanded in the years since *The Video Game Industry*'s publication in 2012, these communities have existed throughout the video game industry's history and contributed to its historical formation, whether through the types of games produced or becoming incorporated into the wider industry as professional developers.

Although *The Video Game Industry* does not include these areas within its scope, this edited volume is a must-read for scholars that are conducting research on the video game industry. Many of the chapters in this edited volume will provide refreshing perspectives to scholars familiar with the video game industry, particularly the chapters on the video game industry as a subcultural industry and the ecological impact of the video game industry. The "Geographical Comparisons" section is a strength of this edited volume as it covers regional industries that most scholars rarely reference in a discussion of the video game industry. Kerr (2012), O'Donnell (2012b), and Sandqvist (2012) not only underline the importance of analyzing the education systems, government policies, sources

of funding, worker migration, technological and economic developments, and cross-industry development of a local video game industry, but also their relevance in shaping the wider global industry. Most of the edited volume takes a predominantly global view on the video game industry, discussing the structure of studios, the development of a game from creation to manufacture, and the various platforms available to developers, but the "Geographical Comparisons" section notes how local industries have shaped and are shaped by these larger technological and economical forces. Moreover, O'Donnell (2012b), Kerr (2012), and Sandqvist (2012) go a step further to suggest how these local industries can develop to ensure sustainable economic growth and the retention of workers in an industry that is plagued with the burnout of both studios and their developers. It will be interesting to see in the years to come how the video game industry developed both locally and globally in relation to the numerous technological and economical forces outlined in this thorough and critical text.

Endnotes

1. According to Juul (2006), a game is: a rule-based system; with variable and quantifiable outcomes; where different outcomes are assigned different values; where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome; where the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome; and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (p. 6–7).

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