

THE EVOLUTION OF GAMING AND HOW IT AFFECTED SOCIETY

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Introduction

Throughout history games have shown up in some form or another. The concept of gaming is not a modern creation, but rather a millennia-old idea that constantly changes. Gaming did not begin to develop into what it is today until early nineteenth century with the creation of wargaming, in which two or more players pitted their fictional armies, represented by figures, against each other. Gaming was not influenced to a large degree again until the creation of *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974, and again with the popularization of video games in following years and the creation of *Magic: the Gathering* in 1993.

The term game can be defined in innumerable ways, but the one that will be used here is defined as follows: a game is an interactive medium through which an established setting is explored, an overlying plot or premise is progressed, usually dependent on the actions of the player(s), with the victorious player(s) most often being rewarded through some means of in-game benefits and/or the next stage of the plot or premise favoring the victor(s). The definition prevents games used for the purpose of gambling being a part of the argument, as was intended, to ensure that only non-gambling games are the focus. This is not dissimilar to the common setup needed for a tabletop role-playing game to be played, which requires “a setting where the game takes place, a basic storyline, and any characters not being represented by the players of the game” need to be fleshed out enough that the setting seems more believable than one where only the important characters have a personality.¹ The similarity between the definition and the factors

¹ Jennifer Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 6.

needed for the setup of tabletop role-playing games is caused by how influential the games were to the development of modern games, most notably *Dungeons and Dragons*.

The influence from medium to medium can be extremely prevalent in the history of the creation of modern games and how they got their inspiration to be what they are. Therefore it would only make sense for the mediums to be presented in order of influence to other mediums. The influences of the mediums on society will be discussed later.

The Evolution of Gaming

Modern gaming did not begin to develop until the creation of war games in the early nineteenth century by Prussian army officers. While inspired by chess, one of the kings of war strategy games for millennia, the war game was more realistic to the battlefield and the troops that were being ordered across them. The benefits of using the war game as a means of battlefield simulation helped “military officers... [as] an invaluable tool to assist in the preparation and testing of plans and methods and in the training of officers.”² One of the major downsides to the games were their “involving frequently a great many people and requiring considerable amounts of time and resources,” making them useful, but not very often used.³ In some cases, however, the time dedicated to the preparation was well worth the effort as officers were able to create new strategies.

Despite its use in military practice, war games appealed to many civilians with a penchant for military strategy and soon took to playing war games to reenact their favorite military battles. With the addition of chance to the game, usually with dice, the element of surprise soon made the game even more appealing with no one knowing fully how the game

² Stephen P. Glick and L. I. Charters, “War, Games, and Military History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 4 (October 1983): 569.

³ Ibid.

would turn out. That soon led to playing the game as though something different happened, altering what could have happened in history. In 1971 the game was altered when Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) published *Chainmail*, a medieval war game that eventually led to the next great medium of gaming, role-playing.

In 1974, the first copy of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* was published by TSR “at GenCon... in a thousand-copy print run... by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.”⁴ The duo sought to combine the war games they loved with fantasy, most notably *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, and to shift the experience from a squadron or three, give or take, to only one person, a hero as it would happen. The result created a new medium that would dwarf its predecessor in popularity.

D&D spawned numerous different editions and expansions, with the original being more of a sword and sorcery style and subsequent releases expanding the settings and environments and even other worlds, and caused many different forms of role-playing games that used the same system or a system very similar to it. Many of the early games in the next major medium, video games, were directly influenced by the early editions of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Another result of the game was the onset of novels centered around the exploits of gaming groups or even in the world established from previously released novels created from game sessions, “taking place in different worlds that [were] actually different campaign settings.”⁵ Movies, comic books, and a cartoon were released based on *Dungeons and Dragons*, despite the supposed side effects claimed to have occurred during game sessions.⁶

⁴ “*Dungeons and Dragons*.” Cracked.com. URL (accessed 28 February 2012), <http://www.cracked.com/funny-107-dungeons-dragons/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Infra.

The next major medium in gaming, video games, rose in popularity in the 1980s. Some of the best, and worst, early video games had a setting, theme, plot, and/or system mechanic derived from *Dungeons and Dragons*. Using its predecessor as a model, the video game industry was able to produce many games quickly, soon developing new types of video games and trying out new mechanics to make the gameplay better and more fun, such as controls, combat, storytelling, and aesthetics. Many of the current video games released are influenced more by the previous video game legacies than the predecessors of the video game industry.

War games experienced an addition that helped keep them on the map in 1987 with the creation of *Warhammer 40K*. The game “is a turn based tabletop war game, set in the far future,” thus adding more fictional elements to the setting of a war game than many of the different kinds before, like different planets, settings, the addition of magic, and even other playable races.⁷ As is the case with popular non-digital games, *Warhammer 40K* has had to make additions and fix a few problems through multiple editions; the game “is currently in [its] fifth edition of rules, races, models, [and] lore.”⁸

Small rectangular pieces of cardboard with pictures and words make the final major medium of modern gaming: trading card games. The game that started trading cards was *Magic: The Gathering*, a game which is still popular enough to hold tournaments with thousands of dollars being given away to the best person there. The increased acceptance of the fantasy setting, thanks to contributions like *Dungeons and Dragons* and the *Lord of the Rings* series, allowed for more fantasy-based games to arise over the years, eventually leading to a portable format. Some have said that “*Magic* is a mix of poker and chess and *Dungeons and Dragons*,”

⁷ “*Warhammer 40K*.” Cracked.com. URL (accessed 28 February 2012), <http://www.cracked.com/funny-164-warhammer-40k/>.

⁸ Ibid.

showing the influence such games have had.⁹ *Magic: The Gathering* is the beginning of most of the other trading card games on the market to be what they are, often influencing their mechanics, aesthetics, or other aspects of the game, even if only in the beginning of the design process.

The Negative Effects on Society

With the rise in popularity of gaming, many people have believed and still believe the games to be evil based on little evidence or the recorded instances of players who committed horrible acts while playing or “forced” to do so because of the games. A good many of these complaints revolve around *Dungeons and Dragons* because it was the earliest among the most popular role-playing game for many years.

Many of the claims are based on supposed Satanism and suicides, both caused by playing the game. There were those who believed the game “promote[d] devil worship among [its] players,” and with the discovery that “there have been cases where game players have killed themselves... many of the same critics who complain of the game[’s] satanic influences also believe [the] game[] influenced the suicides,” with the advocates usually being worried parents or religious leaders.¹⁰ Those who vehemently defended their claims often cited the fact that the suicide victims owned copies of the game manuals and sometimes were fans of other less-than-preferred activities and jumped to the conclusion that the game would often be the straw that broke the camel’s back. Many schools and programs soon banned the game from being played due to the number of complaints being sent in by parents who were worried their children would be next, giving enough voice to cause the schools to submit. The activities perceived as

⁹ Jeff Pearlman, “Revenge of the Nerds,” *Sports Illustrated* 87, no. 20 (17 November 1997): 26.

¹⁰ Kurt Lancaster, “Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?” *Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 2 (Fall 1994), 67.

dangerous were often also discriminated against by the certain members of the public because they were different, like certain genres or artists of music, but sometimes, because of the inevitability of peopling having different personalities from one another, they would be something the public would validly dislike, such as illegal drugs. There was no cause or correlation between the other activities and *Dungeons and Dragons* or the supposed “problems” claimed to result from the game.

Dungeons and Dragons was linked to a total of twenty-nine murders and suicides between 1979 and 1985, one of the more notable of which was of a thirteen-year-old boy in Putnam, Connecticut, whose suicide was used by parents to try to ban the game from being played, but the state Board of Education ruled in favor of the game being played.¹¹ In some cases, the suicide victim’s other habits, such as illegal drug use, would be overlooked as a possible cause of death in favor of “proving” the evil ways of the game on the human mind.

Another, more obvious, problem with *Dungeons and Dragons* is that it, and other tabletop role-playing games, often appears as an activity detrimental to someone’s normalcy, leading those who do play the game to be made fun of and bullied because of that. As a result, “those who play [tabletop role-playing games] feel marginalized by society, thus pushing them to form their own subsociety” so that they may no longer be marginalized.¹² The need to prevent marginalization can cause it to occur with more force, however, as the result may be seen as worse than before and can cause the marginalization to occur at a greater degree.

Video games have also had their fair share of claims of being a “corrupting influence” in the people that play them. Many claims made by those who are against video games are centered

¹¹ Ibid, 71

¹² Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 149.

on the idea that playing video games desensitizes the player to death, violence, drugs, sex, and other unethical activities. The major proponents of these claims too often accuse the video game of being a corrupting influence while ignoring the fact that it is the player who holds all the cards when it comes to ethics within the game.

The anti-video game activists claimed the “results” of playing video games on a repeated basis would consider the player having no ethics left, as though the game drained it out of the player like a vampire drinks blood. What they ignore, however, is that “the agent of the ludic experience, the player, is not an animal beyond morality,” and therefore has an established set of ethics, which, when considering the ages of some players, is not easily destroyed, at least, not by playing a few video games every now and then.¹³ While some games may be violent enough to affect how the player reacts to the situation, sometimes in a way that prevents them from playing that game in the same way or at all ever again, it is ultimately the player who decides if what they are playing should change the way they react to certain situations, and if so, it rarely, if ever, alters how they react to the real world. They do not assault someone with the nearest object when the least desired outcome occurs, or believe that if they die they have another life stored somewhere and will reappear at a checkpoint good as new. Only when a player allows a game to change their ethics completely, both in the game and in real life, will they become the mindless death-machine anti-video game activists believe they will. The conditions for such a thing to occur, however, most often involve psychological factors that can be difficult to handle, diagnose, or even see until it actually occurs.

Violence and morality are not the only problems associated with video games. Among the other supposed problems are that games cause the player to become anti-social and to lose

¹³ Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 77.

their identity by immersing themselves in the reality being presented to and controlled by them. The claims of antisociality stem from the fact that most games are single-player, meaning the player plays it by themselves in their home, which is part of the stereotype of video game players. Because of this, “the stereotype of the video game player is that of a maladjusted, withdrawn ‘geek’ more at home with engagements with technology than with other people,” which easily overlooks actual video game player practices.¹⁴ Players will often overlook the single half of single-player and play with their friends, even if only one of them can hold the controller at a time. They can switch between each other, help on certain stages, and give advice, thus making them social. Not every game is single-player only, thus multiplayer games also help players socialize amongst themselves, but the more modern games have online multiplayer capacities. It can be debated as to how much socialization occurs, but it does exist.

The problem seen with immersion within the game world was that players were often seen by society as people who could not get out of the fictional reality, even when the system was turned off. Like with all successful narratives, immersion is inevitable and the desired effect writers wish for, but video games add an extra step to the immersion: control. With some narratives, one could choose a path and see how things progressed from certain choices, but with video games the player has a greater amount of control since they can control how their character acts and when; in a way they become the character. This leads to the “computer game [being seen] as an identity-challenging space,” one that has not been seen like it before.¹⁵ By giving the player control over a character’s every action, the player in turn feels as though the character is a part of them or that they are in fact the character.

¹⁴James Newman, *Playing with Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

¹⁵ Dean Lockwood and Tony Richards, *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 179.

One way in which this is seen is when a gamer talks about a game or a section of a game. Usually the descriptions switch between using the character's name and the word you, a change that has been seen by some as "proof" of video games being identity-challenging. The structure of the description of the game or its section "suggests that the element of 'Actor' in the transitivity of the game is divided," a common part of describing the medium.¹⁶ In a gamer's "account the Actor is, conventionally, [the character], rendered in the third person," which can be seen with statements like "he escapes the villain," but in other places "the pronoun representing the Actor changes to indicate the player," usually with statements similar to "you need to..." and then continuing to tell someone what they need to do to progress through the level.¹⁷ The change in focus on who the actor is, the character or the player, can be seen as the player being unable to differentiate between reality and the digital fantasy, albeit to a small degree. Claims like this, sometimes paired with studies as proof, led to an increase in claims that video game players would believe that they were in fact in a video game, and that no matter what happened, they would have an extra life or a backup save or the ability to reset and try again should anything bad happen to them. This kind of thinking would lead the player acting recklessly and not giving enough thought to their actions due to this perceived failsafe, thus causing an increase in accidental suicides by the players.

The Positive Effects on Society

What critics of the "evils" of gaming often overlook is that there are positive aspects associated with gaming, some specific to the individual game or medium, but there are some that are shared by all the games and mediums. Two key aspects shared by all games and mediums are

¹⁶Diane Carr and David Buckingham and Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott, *Computer Games* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 75.

¹⁷ Ibid.

that, despite claims from critics saying otherwise, gaming is a social medium, even when not playing a game, such as talking, writing, and drawing about the game, and that games inspire and motivate their players in ways that will often cross over to new mediums, such as art, writing, music, and things like that.

The supposed anti-sociality claims tend to be quite limited in their evidence since they are “typically aimed at one-player games” for video games, and that non-digital games make players reclusive in the eyes of society.¹⁸ Games that are not digital, such as war games, tabletop role-playing games, and trading card games, actually help players to become more social due to the need for other people to play the games. These types of games require more than one person to play, and while it is possible for them to be played solo, they do not reach their full potential unless multiple people are playing, which creates a social situation for the players to interact with each other in fun, meaningful ways. Society often saw players of these games as anti-social and/or reclusive. At first they were played by people who were already set aside because they did not meet certain unknown requirements set by certain groups, thus leading people to bridge a gap that did not need to be bridged and assume that the games were the cause of the players being anti-social and/or reclusive. Video games saw a similar treatment, but the claims were stemmed from the fact that video games tended to be played alone, before long distance multiplayer was even capable. This is due to many games being single-player and that not every video game player wanted to only play with their friends every time they picked up a controller. The thing often overlooked about video games is that even single-player games can be played with multiple people, usually by handing the controller over to other players or talking amongst the other people there, with each person shifting between player and observer roles. This interactivity

¹⁸ Ibid, 121.

shows that video games are just as social as their non-digital counterparts, especially when one includes the multiplayer games. All games and mediums create sociality even when they are not being played, because players will often get excited and talk to other players about the games even when they are not playing them, sometimes even making new friends because of the similar interests in gaming. This kind of socialization is quite common among players as it allows them to discover their interest is shared by someone else.

Gaming has inspired many a player to include some aspect of one of their favorite games or sessions into other forms, such as writing, art and music, with some of these three being much more prevalent with other types of gaming than others. Many players have decided to write their own story using established characters and scenarios from games, most often video games, because the game inspired them to play out alternate scenarios or to keep the plot going when a cliffhanger is reached. This type of writing is known as fan fiction, and while it may have varying degrees of quality, it is created from inspired fans. The act of writing fan fiction is itself a solitary act, unless multiple players decide to coauthor the story, but the means of inspiration is most often not solitary as the games can be talked about or played together by any number of people known to the author. Another way gaming inspires writing can be easily seen from series of books like *Dragonlance*, which was inspired by a *Dungeons and Dragons* gaming session. Some players will turn a session into a story, which is what the session basically is, but the player was inspired by the session to write it all down so others may read what happened as though it truly was a story. Art and music have been similarly affected, leading to the creation of fan art and even music. Fan art is similar to fan fiction, but instead of writing down a new scenario the player draws their favorite character or what their character looks like in the game. Music created by fans usually is a remix of one of their favorite songs from a video game or,

sometimes, is music inspired by a session to go in the background of the game while it plays out. Because of this, gaming has become a form of inspiration as well as a medium for entertainment.

Conclusion

Gaming started out as a means of reenacting military strategy or exploring the what ifs of possible other situations through war games. Eventually war games inspired the creation of tabletop role-playing games, which over time inspired the creation of many a video game. Not too long after the advent of video games came trading card games. With all of these types of games still being played today, gaming is truly an ever-evolving medium with its many ups and downs.

Despite the claims of Satanism, suicide, witchcraft, identity-confusion, numbing players' emotions when it comes to violence and killing, and other supposedly evil side effects of playing these types of games, gaming has proven to be an inspirational tool that has motivated players to go cross-medium in entertainment to create things like fan fiction, fan art, and even music, while also helping develop the social skills of the players because of the need for other players in order for the game to be properly played.

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