

Wade, Alex: *Playback. A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames*. London: Bloomsbury 2016. ISBN: 978-1-6289-2489-3; IX, 168 S.

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Retro is cool these days, no doubt about it, and, thus, the last ten years or so have seen a steady flow of videogame history books. At the one end of the scale we find coffee table books with their nostalgia-inducing, large pictures of popular games and machines. Bitmap Books' colorful *Visual Compendium* series serves as one well-known example of them, whereas *Platform Studies* by the MIT Press resides at the academic end of the spectrum. *Grand Thieves & Tomb Raiders: How British Video Games Conquered the World*<sup>1</sup> by Magnus Anderson and Rebecca Levene largely deals with the same topics as the book under review, Alex Wade's *Playback: A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames*. Their book is, however, less academic and more chronological in its style.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its somewhat misleading title, Wade's new book could be described as a different take on the foundations of the influential British videogame industry – almost an antithesis to most existing books on the subject. Owing to Wade's background in cultural studies and social theory, we get to read about society and everyday people: instead of going through hordes of iconic games or notable characters of the industry, he takes a wider perspective on 1980s' Britain, its economical and political climate, everyday life, as well as the direct predecessors of the videogame phenomenon. His approach is academic by nature, grounded in the works of, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Lefebvre, yet most of the time well comprehensible to any reader interested in the topic.

Leslie Haddon's writings on the domestication of information technology are important precursors to Wade's book.<sup>3</sup> Starting from the late 1980s, Haddon studied home computers and their users in the British context. In line with other researchers representing the domestication approach, Haddon's interest lay in how new technology was marketed to and received by non-expert audiences, and

how they concurrently shaped each other; not unlike Wade, even though the 30 years that have passed, naturally, allow for more distanced and holistic reflection. Wade's approach is also notably in line with Carl Therrien's critique of teleological, simplified histories, where a milestone game inevitably leads to the next milestone.<sup>4</sup>

As the author notes, videogame histories started as Americentric, and only recently have scholars started to cover other, so-called local histories, ranging from Australia to the former socialist states of Eastern Europe. For instance, the well-known video game crash of the early 1980s, a crisis of the industry caused by over-production, was felt differently, if at all, outside the US. With his thematic chapters highlighting various aspects of the British context, Wade further contributes to a more varied picture of an international phenomenon.

Wade discusses the roots of the British game industry: Margaret Thatcher, her right-wing government, and postindustrialism in general shaped British home computing together with other players, such as the BBC with its Computer Literacy Project. The history of the industry, its actors, games and machines has already been outlined in more detail by other authors<sup>5</sup>, but the overview given by Wade serves as a foundation for further topics.

Wade's focus on the role of bedroom cultures, in particular, is a significant contribution to the historiography of videogames. The „cottage industry“ phase has already be-

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Levene / Magnus Anderson, *Grand Thieves & Tomb Raiders: How British Video Games Conquered the World*, London 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See also Carl Therrien, *Video Games Caught up in History*, in: Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.), *Before the Crash. Early Video Game History*, Detroit 2012; Jaakko Suominen, *How to Present the History of Digital Games. Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches*, in: *Games and Culture* 12/6 (2016), pp. 544–562.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Leslie Haddon, *The Home Computer. The Making of a Consumer Electronic*, in: *Science as Culture* 1/2 (1988), pp. 7–51.

<sup>4</sup> Therrien, *Video Games Caught up in History*.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Rodney Dale, *The Sinclair Story*, London 1985; Ian Adamson / Richard Kennedy, *Sinclair and the 'Sunrise' Technology. The Deconstruction of a Myth*, London 1986; Levene / Anderson, *Grand Thieves & Tomb Raiders*.

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come a romantic, canonical narrative, eventually leading to the formation of larger companies. However, not many have dug deeper into the particularities of the domestic context, asking what it actually meant to play, create and copy games at home, as opposed to, say, already existing arcades (whose rise and fall will receive plenty of attention later on in the book). Based on existing studies, Wade notes how bedroom cultures were strongly gendered: for girls, the bedroom was a social space of „girly“ activities, such as gossiping and flipping through magazines with friends. In contrast, boys formed the majority of early computer gamers, which was a more solitary activity.

Even though generally critical of the militant narratives of so-called console/machine/format wars, Wade still considers the subject worth revisiting. The well-known juxtaposition of Nintendo and Sega, or the Commodore 64 and the ZX Spectrum, are certainly familiar to any hobbyist of the 1980s and 1990s. Wade also criticizes the linearity of the influential model which divides gaming consoles into separate „generations“. More often than not, these generations have not actually existed anywhere else than in taxonomies. When talking about star programmers and companies, it is too easy to overlook the role of game publishers and the press, but Wade does not fall into that trap: both are regarded as vital players that shaped the field in their own ways.

In his last chapter, Wade explores how British politics were reflected in games. The focus on class is a common feature of British social and cultural studies, less present in (sub-)cultural studies elsewhere. The decline of heavy industry set the background for new lines of work, games included. It is hard to say how socially conscious the game creators of the time actually were, but the games analyzed by Wade seem to feature atypical settings that can be viewed as commentaries on working life: *Mad Nurse* (1983), *Trashman* (1984) and *Hampstead* (1984), to name a few, are examples of games that perfectly capture their sociocultural context and, arguably, could only have emerged in Britain.

If you accept the premise of *Playback* – fo-

cus on society and culture instead of notable games and their creators – there is little to fault in it. A hint of repetition and jumpy line of thought can be found at places, but they hardly distract the reader. I found some minuscule slips, such as the POKE command „changing the memory address of a program“ (p. 36)<sup>6</sup>, or the unclear distinction between Scandinavian and Baltic countries, yet, again, nothing really worth mentioning. As stated above, I do not think that the book actually is a „genealogy“ by definition.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it definitely is an important and easy to read contribution to our knowledge on the roots of British videogames.

HistLit 2018-4-016 / Markku Reunanen über Wade, Alex: *Playback. A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames*. London 2016, in: H-Soz-Kult 05.10.2018.

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<sup>6</sup>Early 1980s' home computers typically had the BASIC programming language built in. The command „POKE“ lets the user modify the contents of a given memory address, for instance, to cheat in games or access hardware features otherwise unavailable in BASIC.

<sup>7</sup>Suominen, How to Present the History of Digital Games.