The Video Game Archaeologist

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The global video game industry generates tens of billions of dollars in revenues per year and attracts millions of followers without us paying much attention to what they say about our society, our culture, and our relationship to technology, explains Concordia University professor Darren Wershler, a new-style archaeologist who has dusted off old consoles to reveal their forgotten or ignored history.

Darren Wershler has never really been attracted to video games. Like everyone else, he tried different consoles during his youth, but nothing more. Everything changed a decade ago, when he finished his doctoral studies.

"I bought an original Xbox console as a present to myself," he recalls. "Last summer, I went to see my graduate students to ask them for a power cable to plug it in, and they told me they had nothing for something so old. I was shocked," he said, laughing, as though he had a state-of-the-art object in his hands.

This professor, passionate about literature, communications and the media, has found in video game consoles an unexpected object of study. He noticed that his console, new to his eyes, yet obsolete for his students, is part of a story that deserves to be told.

"One of the reasons to be interested in history is to understand our own existence. When we see that the video game industry has become more lucrative than the cinema industry

and we can't talk about it, in my opinion, it's a big problem," he says.

"A large part of the economy of Quebec, and Montreal in particular, depends on the video game companies," he continues. "We offer huge tax credits so these companies can stay here and promote an aspect of culture. We must therefore consider the history of video games, and the political economy that surrounds it."

This awareness led him to build a collection of consoles and video games from the early 1970s to 2002. In a cramped room at Concordia University, boxes of all colours and sizes are stacked on metal shelves. The best-known consoles rub shoulders with those that have fallen into oblivion, like the Vectrex, launched in the United States in 1982, or the Atari Video Computer System, which entered the market in 1977.

"The story I want to tell isn't whether *Mario Bros* is a better game than *Donkey Kong*. I don't care," says Wershler. I want to tell a story about objects. I want to know what happens when we bring them all together and ask what they are telling us about how we view technology and culture, how to spend our money, how to use our free time. These are all important things."

Reflection of an Era

The answers to these questions are many and sometimes unexpected, says Wershler. He says, for example, that the arrival of television in North American homes changed the way we set up the household. The TV replaced the piano and the hearth as the central feature of the room, which explains why the first television models were covered with wood: their manufacturers wanted to give them the appearance of a piece of furniture like any other.

When the video game consoles came in to the home, the same approach was adopted, when manufacturers added a woodgrain

finish, he notes.

Each game console's box is also a reflection of the reality of an era. Over the decades, the image of the family playing together was replaced first by that of a young boy playing by himself, then simply by the image of the console itself.

"This series of marketing decisions is an indicator of how we perceive technology and the role we want to give it," he notes.

Demystifying Technology

By collecting consoles from different eras, Wershler, a graduate of York University, also wants to reconstruct the video game industry's memory of its own history and processes, which he said is neglected by several major studios. "When a company finishes a project, the team is often dissolved, and there is no real record of the work that has been done," he says. "The industry does not even know its own history. And when it knows it, it does not want to talk about it."

Dr. Wershler has just concluded the second edition of the Concordia Summer School on Media Archeology, which he set up to demystify the origins and nature of the technological objects that surround us.

As part of an intensive work week, he asks his students to disassemble consoles and reprogram them: "It's a way of remembering that something like this is a manufactured item," he said, holding up his smartphone. "It does not have to be manufactured or designed this way. There are other ways of doing things."

"This is what we have. The question is whether that is what we want, and what the other options would be."

translated by Darren Wershler