

***The Medium of the Video Game.* By Mark J. P. Wolf, ed.
Foreword by Ralph H. Baer. (Austin: University of Texas Press,
2001. xx + 203 p., ISBN 0-292-79150-X)**

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Volume 24, Number 2, 2002

Musées
Museums

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006656ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/006656ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brodie, I. (2002). Review of [*The Medium of the Video Game.* By Mark J. P. Wolf, ed. Foreword by Ralph H. Baer. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xx + 203 p., ISBN 0-292-79150-X)]. *Ethnologies*, 24(2), 264–267.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/006656ar>

and poetry, as well as the general slant of the questions in the Instructors' Companion, would also make it useful in an English literature course which included some folklore. The book could conceivably also be used as a text for advanced folklore students, if the instructor supplemented it with more in-depth readings on folklore theory and critical analysis.

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The Medium of the Video Game. By Mark J. P. Wolf, ed. Foreword by Ralph H. Baer. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xx + 203 p., ISBN 0-292-79150-X)

This book will, in some respects, be looked back on as a pivotal moment in the history of video game studies. Mark J. P. Wolf has presented an argument that not only understands the video game as a separate medium but looks at the medium itself, on its own terms and not as an economic or sociological phenomenon. That said, this book suffers from some serious flaws, most of which seem to be attributable to Wolf in his additional role as editor.

Of the eleven articles in the book (nine chapters, an Introduction, and a Foreword) six are by Wolf. Of the remaining, the Foreword by Ralph Baer, inventor of the *Odyssey*, the first home video gaming console, nicely contextualises the book by establishing that the video game phenomenon, in potency if not in form or act, stretches back to the early sixties when the first game, *Spacewar!*, was created at MIT in 1962 by (who else?) bored graduate students with access to a computer. Video games coincide with the coupling of a computer to a video display, a seemingly self-evident observation which is nevertheless critical to a discussion of medium.

Chapter Two, "Super Mario Nation" is a reprint of an article from *American Heritage* by Steven L. Kent on the history of the video game which, although informative, is five years out of date. It does not account for the most recent generation of home gaming consoles B PlayStation 2, X-Box, GameCube B or advances in home computing. Considering that one of Kent's main arguments is the speed at which video games evolve, the inclusion of his article here is ironic.

Chapter Seven, Rochelle Slovin's "Hot Circuits," looks at the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the same name at the American Museum of the Moving Image, of which Slovin is founding director, with the hindsight of a further decade of advancement in video games as a cultural phenomenon. There may be much here for the museologist: the original exhibition was comprised of a "canon" of console units, with the units arranged like an arcade, albeit with greater spacing, and tokens given at the entrance so they could be played. However, when the exhibit traveled and was brought into smaller rooms, the units, now crammed together more tightly, were treated less as objects in a museum and more as games in an arcade: decals were peeled away, chewing gum was left on them, and so forth. For the exhibition, the museum commissioned an essay from the poet and critic Charles Bernstein, "Play it Again, Pac-Man," which as Chapter Eight is now in print for the fourth time. It is truly dreadful, and an example of the worst form of criticism since it offers nothing constructive. It is apparent that Bernstein's observations of video game playing and arcade life are all drawn from perceptions left untested, and his essay reads like a *Newsweek* article filtered through an introductory liberal Arts course on Marx, Freud, and MacLuhan.

For the folklorist, it is Rebecca Tews' "Archetypes on Acid" which may be the most useful as an entry into the video game world. Tews, a psychology doctoral candidate from Marquette — which makes her almost by default a Jungian — approaches the question of the popularity of video games by addressing their use of Jungian archetypes. If we transliterate, or transpose, this conclusion by instead noting the recurrent use of motifs in video games, we have the genesis of the genus "folklore and/in" applied to this medium. (For an excellent refutation of the reluctance to go beyond "folklore in" in the "folklore and" approach, see Kuly 2000: 85-96). Furthermore, Tews is actually interested in the people who play the games, and not simply the games as text. Hers is the only article supported by fieldwork as she is the only contributor who bothered to observe someone at play.

It seems the essays not written by Wolf were added at the request of the publisher to beef up the book to a more publishable two hundred pages. The weight of the book, and its real value, is Wolf's own work, wherein he provides arguments for granting medium status on the video game, and then separately approaches time, space, and narrative in the video game, ending with the genesis of genre. Video game producers

have often borrowed conventions and ideas from other media, but the cause and effect relation between the player's actions and the actions of the "player-surrogate" in the diegetic world of the video game and the attendant notion of developing gaming skill, and the navigation through this diegetic world's time, space and narrative independent from the programmers' specific intent (albeit dependent on a general intent: Mario cannot stay at home doing laundry), necessitate a hermeneutic different from that of other media.

Even here, however, Wolf falls into a trap that may be endemic to "higher criticism": the examples he cites to ground his conclusions are not necessarily games that are widely played. The context of games played by players is shelved in favour of a game as text approach. To illustrate, Wolf provides *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* as an example for an early use of opening sequences, for the use of both side and top views within the same game, for the graphical representation of clothing for character detail, and for the direct transference of characters and plot from another medium. What impact this may or may not have had on the development of the medium or on the game playing community is questionable, however, since, as Kent has already told us, "The game was dull and hard to play. In the end Atari created a landfill in a New Mexico desert, dumped in millions of *E.T.*, *Pac-Man*, and other cartridges, crushed them with a steamroller, and buried the fragments under cement" (45). Hardly an argument for canonicity.

Another concern comes with Wolf's attempt to narrow down what precisely the video game *is*. Wolf tends to use the broadest possible definition: a "game" — something with conflict, rules, player ability, and measured outcome — on a "video" — raster or vector graphics or text; cathode ray or LCD display. Although this catholicity is not only suited for his textual purposes but preferable to establishing a hierarchy of display formats, there does seem to be a significant contextual difference between formats. Play on the arcade console unit is different from play on the home console unit, which is different from play on the home computer, which is different from play on the networked home computer, which is different from play on a handheld module. An arcade game, which is designed to make money through quick turnover, is by its very nature brief, and the player is always on the verge of "Game over". The arcade is also public space, where the players find themselves a spectacle, even if the spectator is the next person in line. Contrast this with playing the same uninterrupted game for hours on end at a

home computer in the stereotypical basement and we may begin to see how the differences of game display introduce notions of differing genres extrinsic from the genres based on interactivity (the generic basis for Wolf's Chapter Six, "Genre and the Video Game"). There are hints throughout that Wolf takes these differences seriously, but ultimately the point is left unresolved.

As a resource, readers would be well advised to double-check some of Wolf's facts: the date of *Sid Meier's Civilization*, for example, is given as both 1993 (58) and 1991 (68 and 88), while it is sometimes difficult to decipher from context whether Wolf is referring to the arcade version of *Night Driver* (1976) or the version for the Atari 2600, the dates for which are either 1980 (63) or 1988 (104). The index seems cobbled together, with, for example, separate entries for "Sony PlayStation" and "Sony Playstation," although the former is used exclusively throughout the text. These are minor points, but show a lack of attention to detail which betrays the rush-to-print feel of the book: a final edit or proofread would have been appreciated. An appendix by Wolf on "Resources for Video Game Research" is a bit lacklustre, but useful for the initiate.

Ultimately, this is a fine book. What limitations it has, comes from it being the first of its kind: subsequent work will have the advantage of both building on and challenging Wolf. As an opening salvo in what should turn into an interesting field of cultural study it does the service of addressing the issue squarely and with the aim of comprehensiveness.

Reference

Kuly, Marc. 2000. "Ideology, History, and the Discipline of Folklore: Reading *Media Sense* Fifteen Years Later". In *Culture & Tradition* 22: 85-96

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