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Author(s): Kerttula, Tero

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The foundations of Let's Play – Live action representation of video games in television and online 1975-2018

Tero Kerttula

University of Jyväskylä
PL35, 40014, Jyväskylä Finland
tero.t.kerttula@jyu.fi

Abstract: In this article, I look at television shows based on video games in comparison to modern Let's Play –videos. The paper draws a timeline from the earliest shows to modern days and discusses the evolution of video games representation throughout the years. For the study, I gathered a global dataset of old television programs about the subject and categorized the findings. When comparing the narrative and representation of the television shows with Let's Plays, the study suggests that even though there are some similar elements between the two, they are still cultural products of their own. As Let's Plays are more narrative products than the television shows, they are a phenomenon of their own. The study shows that the television shows contribute more to the cultural activity and legacy of watching other people play.

Keywords: Video games, television, Let's Play.

1 Introduction

Watching others play has also been a part of video gaming culture for a long time. Gathering around a television or an arcade machine, while someone is playing was a social way to experience games [15, 22]. This kind of social aspect has been an important part of the culture, as even early video game commercials depicted this [16].

Video games have been a part of print and live action media since their first success in the late 1970's. Roughly, the media attention divides into two main categories: the written texts, such as reviews and guides in video game magazines and live action footage as seen in for example television shows and separately sold VHS-tapes.

These days live action video gaming has moved more and more to internet. One of the most popular forms of online video is Let's Play (abbr. LP), in which a player or players plays a chosen video game while commenting the game at the same time. Emerging 2006 at the discussion forums of Something Awful, Let's Plays have become a big part of online video culture and a very important phenomenon in the whole video game scene [5].

In this article, I will take a closer look into the history of different visual representations around video games, more specifically the video game –based television shows. The aim of the research is to find some evidence from the history about the possible elements of the mediated video gaming of old that might have given especially the contemporary amateur Let's Players some influence for their hobby.

What possible similarities do these shows share with the narrative and visual representation of video gaming in modern online videos and what kind of evolution happened in the structure of the shows towards modern age? How have these shows talked about video games throughout the years and how they present them?

I look at the shows globally, because taking sources from only one country would severely limit the amount of material used in the research, thus also limiting the scope of the research. By taking a global focus, it is also possible to see the possible changes in genres and productions towards the digital age. Many of the shows also aired globally through satellite and cable. The focus of this article is in the shows that represent actual video games found in arcades and stores. There has been several different shows with gamified elements in them, but with games exclusively made for broadcast use.

I collected the database for the article between winter 2018 and spring 2019. Currently the data consists of 150 different television shows and channels from 28 different countries. Sources for the data varies, ranging from for example online articles and blogs [3] and forum posts [18] to official marketing material [19]. For some global shows, I used localized Wikipedia-articles with their sources. For example, this was the case with Japanese shows [20].

The data consists of the name of the show, show format, years of running, country of production, the original broadcasting channel, producers, original time slot and possible weblinks with extra information. The different formats include game shows, participatory shows, magazine shows and lifestyle shows¹. Due to language barriers, the categories have been determined by watching the shows from different sources, e.g. Youtube and Daily Motion. If the show was not available online, the determination based on descriptions of the shows found from message boards and social media. All of the shows discussed in this article are available online, and the analysis bases on the viewed footage.

2 Video games in live action media

The most usual examples of the early days of game-based television were game shows, which mixed trivia questions and video gaming. The NBC show *The Magnificent Marble Machine* (1975-1976) with its enormous pinball machine in the studio was one of the most notable predecessors in these types of game shows.

The earliest example of a television game show based on video games was *Starcade* (United States 1982-1984), a game show where contestant played arcade games together. The show ran for 130 episodes before its cancellation [3]. What really targeted the show to the gaming audience of the time were the questions that were about video and arcade games. Therefore to win in *Starcade*, nimble fingers was not enough of a skill, you also had to know a thing or two about the games. The questions lead to an interesting note: just as in traditional game shows, the audience could also learn something about the games via the trivia. *Starcade*'s idea of trivia questions about video games is also present in shows such as *Super Mario Club*² (Japan 1990-1993) and its

¹ As many shows especially after 1990's featured many different genre-specific elements, the definition of genre is difficult. Therefore, the preliminary category is defined by the focus of the show.

² Original title スーパーマリオクラブ

followers *Super Mario Stadium*³ (Japan 1993-1996) and *64 Mario Stadium*⁴ (Japan 1996-2000).

This brings up an interesting notion. As the footage of the gameplay might give the audience ludic strategies for the game shown [24], the questions and the answers provide metatextual information surrounding the games and video game culture to the viewers, much like many Let's Players do [5].

The game shows treat the games as something special. The contestants have to win something else before they can get to playing. From the narrative perspective, even though there is not much narration in the game shows apart from the host's friendly banter and the players' enthusiastic talk, some vocal reactions are present. The visual focus is on the player and the game, which stages the event of video gaming like the audience was there witnessing the occasion. Even in the early days, the gameshows featured close-ups from the players' faces, which made it possible for the audience to see the emotions the heat of the game brought up.

Fig. 1. Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge (The United States 1988)



Following the success of the Nintendo Entertainment System and Sega Master System, television media started to feature video games again more often in their own television shows. Along with regular video game magazines, television took also part in the video game journalism providing video game reviews, hints and news.

Some print magazines hosted their own television shows. For example *GamePro TV* (Great Britain 1991, 1996-1997), which was made to side with the *GamePro Magazine* and *GameWave*⁵ (Japan 1998-2002), collaborating with *Famitsu* magazine. In some

³ Original title スーパーマリオスタジアム

⁴ Original title 64マリオスタジアム

⁵ Original title ゲームウェーブ

cases, the shows spawned print magazines. This happened with for example *New Reality*⁶ (Russia 1994-1998) and *Top Kids* (Argentina 1994-1995).

During the 1990's, the magazine shows started to appear in wide array of different countries. Many of the shows featured video game reviews and news in the side of competitive gameplay and game show –elements. Where *Power Play* (Netherlands 1992-1993) focused on reviews and news, *VideoXOC* (Catalonia 1992-1995) and *X Base* (Germany 1994-1995) incorporated competitive gaming, audience letters and much more to the magazine format. Some magazine shows had also a broader focus, covering e.g. movies, music and comics as well as video games. This was the case with for example *Trolspejlet* (Denmark 1989-still running) and *L33t* (Italy 2006-2007).

Some magazine shows continued their life in the internet as online shows. These shows include *Tilt!* (Finland 1997-current), *Arcadia* (Guatemala 2008-current) and *Re-Play* (Czech Republic 2009-current). Despite moving the shows online, the format in the shows still follows closely to the television equivalents.

The representation of video gaming in these shows is quite varying. The competitive parts show lot more gameplay than the reviews. Usually the magazine shows tried to cover as much as possible in one episode, because of which the length of the footage from the games was usually very short. Because of this, the magazine shows are closer in style to modern Youtube-shows that discuss the games from a historical or journalistic angle than Let's Plays.

Few of the more peculiar types of shows were the participatory video game shows, where the audience took part in the games by calling into the show. The earliest example of these is perhaps *TV Powww!* (1978-1990), where viewers could call in to the show with their telephones and participate in the game seen on television. The show was distributed widely first over USA, then internationally. The game played by shouting "POW!" to the telephone, which lead to a pixelated bullet fired from the cannon seen on the television screen. The exact date of when the use of the format ceased is unknown, but apparently, the format aired in Australia and Italy still as late as 1990 [1].

In 1988, Danish television company TV2 asked programmer *Ivan Sölvason* to program a video game that played in a television game show. Upon request, Sölvason came up with *OsWALD*, later *Super OsWALD*, the interactive video game program, in which the audience could play in the broadcast with their telephones at home. [17]

OsWALD was a Danish thing and never aired outside Denmark, but *Hugo* (Denmark 1990-2009) became a big thing worldwide and broadcasted in over 40 countries worldwide. Like in *OsWALD*, the audience could try to participate in the game with their own telephones. The main character, Hugo the Troll, controlled by pressing buttons on the telephone accordingly to the instructions given on screen. Hugo's success lead to a couple more shows like it, such as *Pizza Rollo* (France 1994-1995), *Joe Razz* (Sweden 1994), *Throat and Neck* (Denmark/Brazil 1997-1999) and *Galilei the Dog* (Finland 1996-1997). Some shows incorporated console video gaming into the play-by-phone –format. Most notable shows of this kind are *Games World* (Great Britain/Germany 1993-1998), *Game Over* (Finland 1994-1997) and *Maxihra* (Slovakia 1997-2000)

⁶ Original title Новая Реальность

The play-by-phone –shows featured more detailed gameplay footage than the magazine shows, even though only for a couple of minutes per game. Obviously, the players are not visible on the screen and they are audible only at the beginning and at the end of each game. The host is therefore also the game narrator. Because of the limited technology, the gameplay on screen never really represented how the game would play on an actual controller, but served as a chance to see someone else play nevertheless.

Fig. 2. Game Over (Finland 1994-1997)



One of the more interesting television shows is *Subido* (Finland 2002). The show consisted mainly of just playing and showing video games with celebrity guests, but with a laid-back style that was quite close to many Let's Plays of today. What made *Subido* stand out from other shows of this kind, was the audience's commentary, sent as text messages to the show and then presented on the screen as the people played. The guests and hosts in the show also reacted to these text messages, in a way communicating with the audience. The similarities between the concept of *Subido* and modern Twitch.tv –streams are quite remarkable.

This kind of audience reflection is comparable to the reflective narration of modern Let's Plays [5, 14]. By the time of *Subido*, mobile technology made it possible to send text messages to the show, unlike in the shows of the early 1990's. Earlier the audience had to send traditional letters, faxes or post cards to the broadcasting company.

There are a couple of other examples of television shows resembling more the style of Let's Plays. Earliest example of this kind of representation is *The Game Power*⁷ (Japan 1991-1994), where different gamers give playing tips to audience while playing a short amount of the game. It seems that even closer example is *Me in Mir* (Great Britain/Italy 1999-2006). Very little information of the show is available, but it appears that the show was about the host playing online role-playing game called *Legend of Mir* as different types of characters in each episode. Instead of playing by the rules, the idea was to mess around with the other players in different manners.

*Game Center CX*⁸ (Japan 2003-current) is one of the shows regarded as a starting point of Let's Play [10, 14]. In the show, Japanese comedian *Shinya Arino* plays old video games. The whole idea of the game show was to show Arino's comedic reactions to these games, while he was desperately trying to complete the difficult classics. Along with Arino's reactions, one notable element in the show is the interaction between Arino, the narrator of the show and the studio audience. Therefore, the narration of one episode works in multiple layers, much like modern Let's Plays. Another show, *Game Record GP*⁹ (Japan 2007-2011) followed *Game Center CX*'s example, but instead of just one player, the show featured multiple Japanese celebrities with the task of playing old Famicom/PC Engine -games.

Fig. 3. *Tsurega/つれゲー* (Japan 2010-2016)



It also seems that during the last few years, the television shows are starting to take influence from the online shows. Shows such as *Shooting Game Sukyakudanjun*¹⁰ (Japan 2009) and *Tsurega*¹¹ (Japan 2010-2016) are good examples of this. Especially

⁷ Original title Theゲームパワー

⁸ Original title ゲームセンターCX

⁹ Original title ゲームレコードGP

¹⁰ Original title シューティングゲーム攻略軍団参上!

¹¹ Original title つれゲー

the latter is very much broadcasted Let's Playing, with two women playing a selected game and commenting over it without any other purpose than just playing. Even the visual framing of the show seems to be very close to Youtube-videos. Also worth mentioning is *PlayHit* (Brazil 2006-current), which combines pre-recorded gameplay footage and popular music to create often-humorous video game music videos.

As it seems that many of these shows featuring Let's Play -like narration and representation are from Japan, it is still unlikely that most of these shows would have affected the beginnings of the Let's Play -scene. Most of the Japanese shows never made it abroad, because of the cultural differences and the language barrier [4]. Therefore, it is plausible that these shows are mostly unknown in the west. However, in the past few years, some western shows have started adopting different ways of representing video game play. These shows include *The First Hour* (Great Britain 2013-2017), *Dara O Briain's Go 8 Bit* (Great Britain 2016-2018) and *Parker Plays* (USA 2017-current), which are all based on narrative gaming in the style of a Let's Play.

4 Comparison to Let's Play

A Let's Play consists roughly of three different parts. The main thing is the gameplay, either as a video or as still images. Second thing is the player-narrator, the individual or individuals playing the game. Third part is the story the player-narrator tells, the story about playing a video game. [5]

This story of playing a game has many aspects to it. Player-narrators share playing tips and techniques to the audience, reveal some opinions about the game at hand and react to events in the game with emotion. They also sometimes make intertextual connections with the game and other popular culture, interact with their audience and share some insight into their lives outside video gaming. In this sense, Let's Plays are quite close to live streaming and speedrunning. [5, 23]

One particular style of narration is very distinct to Let's Plays. The character stories or avatar role-playing, where the narrator creates a fictional character in the game. This way the narrator tells the original story of the game in a different way [21]. With the exception of these more storified Let's Plays, quite many modern Let's Plays also feature footage of the player-narrator, making the reactions and emotions towards the game visible. This imagery adds another visual layer on top of the game, giving the audience an insight to how the game might feel like to play [23].

Even though there are many similarities between all recorded footage and gameplay footage [9], there are also some big differences. One major difference between the television shows and the internet videos is that the Let's Play -videos usually tackle only one game at a time. This way it is possible to get more insight into the game at hand and have more background information about it. This could be due to the amateur/professional-duality of youtubing. Youtubers are able to write their webisodes how they like and not try to appeal to a large mass of television viewers [2]. However, with the television shows, the main purpose with a few exceptions was to show footage of as many games as possible. Especially the magazine shows served also a journalistic purpose, in side of a marketing one.

Because of this, the LP's are also possible to consider as a method of video game preservation, especially when the LP shows a considerable amount of footage from the

video game and/or when the narrator links memories about the game into the narration [6, 10]. This seems not to be the case with the television shows. They are cultural products of their own and as they show only a small portion of the actual gameplay, the representation of the games does not stand as remarkable as the show in whole.

Also from a narrative point of view, LP's differ quite a lot from the television shows. The clearest example of this is the pace of narration. While in LP's the narration is continuous, in the television shows it is more sporadic and focuses on many other things than just the game itself. Especially in the earlier television shows, the main narrator is the host of the show, rather than the player.

Let's Players however often reflect their audience during the commentary [5]. While in the television shows the hosts also usually acknowledges the audience, the audience does not affect the show. In Let's Plays and online streams it is on the contrary quite common for the narrator to interact with the audience and to even take some tips and tricks for the game this way.

What these shows do have in common with Let's Play and streaming, is watching someone else play the game on the screen. Especially in shows where the players are present in the studio and visible for the audience, the emotions of the player, the excitement and perhaps even the ultimate failure are some of the key components of modern Let's Play [5].

One reason for television production companies and stations taking ideas from the internet shows is obvious: the advertising money has moved more and more from television to internet. Therefore, the television shows have a need to cut costs and find new ways to find their audience. This is very much applicable to video game shows. [7, 11, 12]

5 Conclusion

In the light of history, it is clear that Let's Plays are very much something original, but they do share some elements with the television shows of the past. One of the main differences between the television shows and LP's is the representation of the video game at hand. In television, only a small portion of the gameplay was shown, where as in LP's the main idea is to show as much of the gameplay as possible.

Although it is evident that Something Awful and The Let's Play Archive coined the term "Let's Play" and created the whole phenomenon, the elements of which the Let's Plays consist have been out there in the media for a long time. Even though the shows for the main part are not Let's Plays, they still seem to contribute to the legacy of watching other people play video games. This is because the main similarities between the television shows and Let's Plays are in how the player experience is represented and narrated in especially the game shows.

There seems to be more things in common in watching the shows than producing them. The reasons are evident: the excitement of watching someone play a game, maybe comparing skills with the player or maybe even learning something new in the process. This does not apply to magazine shows however, as in those the gameplay is pre-recorded and is limited only in short and edited clips needed for the reviews.

The television shows are also quite far from the Let's Plays themselves in means of the narration. Still, the aspect of seeing someone else play on the television and later,

taking part in the television show from your own home is one of the crucial aspects of how players wanted to show their gaming skills to the wide public and to watch how others performed in a video game.

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