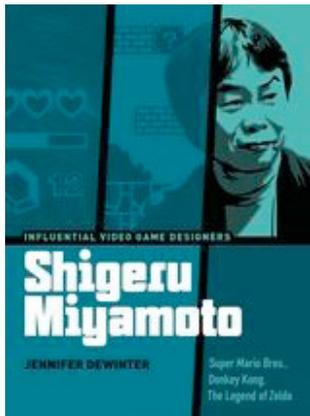# Book Review: *Shigeru Miyamoto* by Jennifer deWinter

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DeWinter, Jennifer (2015) *Shigeru Miyamoto: Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda*. London: Bloomsbury. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-1-6289-2388-9

Given their mass cultural appeal and growing presence in university departments, it's always surprising just how few monographs exist on individual videogames, and fewer still on individual creators within the videogame industry. It is this gap that Bloomsbury's 'Influential Video Game Designers' series seeks to plug, and that alone makes it worthy of attention. What better place to begin the series than with a figure whose importance within the industry is so revered that many refer to him as the father of modern videogames: Shigeru Miyamoto.

Now in his sixties, Miyamoto has presided over several generations of Nintendo consoles from the colossal successes of the NES and the Wii, to the commercial missteps of the GameCube and WiiU, surely making him one of the eldest of statesmen. It's all the more incredible to think that this career has been entirely in the service of one company, which he wandered into almost accidentally. Indeed, Miyamoto is now so integrated into Nintendo's brand identity, having developed such seminal franchises as *Super Mario Bros.*, *Donkey Kong* and the *Legend of Zelda* (as the book's subtitle reminds us), that he

might himself be put forward for consideration as an object of study in MIT Press' Platform Studies series.[1] Indeed, Platform Studies is one of the few academic series of books that performs a similarly focused analysis on an important aspect of gaming culture, rather than the usual attempts to summarise gaming more broadly (surely we are beyond the need for introductory tomes on game studies by now?). Bloomsbury's series looks as though it is capable of performing a similar function for individual designers.

An early discussion of Miyamoto's approach to designing *Donkey Kong* informs a theme that is threaded through the book, namely his understanding of design as constrained and enabled by the technical affordances of hardware. Miyamoto was serving under Gunpei Yokoi, who deWinter claims influenced him with his design philosophy *Kereta Gijutsu no Shuhei Shikou* (2015: 5) – which has been translated by Tristan Donovan as 'lateral thinking with withered technology' (2010: 205) – when he was tasked with designing a game to work on unsold Radar Scope arcade cabinets that were to be repurposed. The resulting game, *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo

1981), would become an influential hit and catapult Miyamoto into game design. However, deWinter notes that the only reason that 'Jumpman', the protagonist of that title who would later turn into Mario, came to jump at all was because the cabinet had an additional button and Miyamoto needed to find a use for it! This is a key example of Miyamoto's functional approach to game design, where time and time again his design choices are driven by the needs of the gameplay mechanics or the hardware. Indeed, many of his games were designed to showcase the unique functionality of new piece of technology, like the design of *Wii Sports* (Nintendo 2006) to provide a proof of concept for the Wii.

This anecdotal nugget, like many others deWinter offers throughout the book, is gleaned from a substantial series of interviews conducted between Nintendo president Satoru Iwata (who tragically passed away in 2014) and his right hand man Shiguro Miyamoto, called 'Iwata Asks'. These interviews were used as promotional material to provide fans of Nintendo insight into the creative process. The reliance on a single interview source, and one developed for PR purposes at that, might raise a few eyebrows. Yet this is perhaps unavoidable, given the closed-off nature of most of the games industry; something that Nintendo are no less guilty of despite their friendly demeanour. DeWinter insightfully uses these interviews to build a textual representation of Miyamoto, and then performs a discourse analysis of the resulting construct.

Like the code of a game, the author may always be just out of reach, but deWinter doesn't let that put her off; nor Roland Barthes' famous assertion that the author is dead (Barthes 1993). In keeping with a tradition of auteur theory that came to prominence in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, deWinter notes that 'What is remarkable about Miyamoto is that his design vision has stayed fairly consistent since his early designs' (2015: 123). The development of auteur theory was an attempt to reconstruct the director as artist from the industrial processes of the film text; to read their creative patterns and preoccupations within their films and to use them to elevate such works that they admired as well as the medium of cinema as a whole (see also Caughie, 1981). Considering the commercial and industrial nature of videogame production such auteurs are even harder

to discern, but deWinter makes it clear that her analysis of Miyamoto is inseparable from the contexts in which he operates. For instance, Miyamoto benefited immensely from the protectionist, culturally dominant corporate identity of Nintendo (deWinter 2015:11). He also drew from his own life experiences, with *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986) reportedly an attempt to evoke exploring caves in Kyoto during his childhood (2015: 36). The Japanese cultural context is also found to play a role in his work, with the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise being influenced by Sumo (2015: 63), and Wii's iconic avatars (Miis) by Kokeshi dolls (2015: 101). His training as an industrial designer is particularly of note, a point that is perhaps one of deWinter's most important contributions. Whilst Miyamoto is well-known and loved for his work on the *Mario* and *Zelda* franchises, his roles as producer, mentor, hardware design and even businessman are less broadly understood, but are elaborated upon throughout the book.

DeWinter explores Miyamoto's involvement in the design of numerous pieces of hardware; but perhaps most notably, it was Miyamoto that spearheaded the creation of a family friendly device with the Wii. DeWinter successfully argues that Miyamoto's approach to game design and hardware design are jointly guided by an approach to the experiential and 'fun' aspect of play, as well as his desire to appeal to as many people as possible. In particular, his pioneering influence on the Wii's motion controller made the device accessible through its mimetic qualities, leading deWinter to position Miyamoto at the forefront of what Jesper Juul characterises as 'the casual revolution' (Juul 2012); the broadening appeal of videogames that the Wii and mobile platforms precipitated. Suggesting, however, that Nintendo are a force of experimentation and creativity in contrast to Sony and Microsoft may be a step too far, as Nintendo are just as famous for slowly iterating upon long established and commercially safe franchises, most of which were created by Miyamoto.

Although the book is generally a joy to read, something that is too rarely said of scholarly works, and provides an insight into an undertheorised area in game studies, there are a few points to note. I disagreed with some of deWinter's assumptions, specifically the suggestion that Nintendo relies on the income of third party developers, which, though

once the case, has been increasingly less true since the Nintendo 64. Indeed the current dire straits that the underpowered WiiU finds itself in is partly due to the lack of large third party releases. This is a result of the lack of technical parity between the system and its more successful rivals, resulting in it being extremely difficult, and therefore economically unviable, for third parties to port their games onto the system.

The book concludes with the full transcript of Miyamoto's 1999 Game Developer Conference Keynote address, which, though informative and supportive of DeWinter's arguments, since it is available for free online it's hard not to see it as padding in an already short book.[2] Similarly the expansive gameography compiled in collaboration with Nicholas DeMarinis, although useful, takes up a lot of room and might have been more useful organised chronologically rather than by franchise. DeWinter also occasionally misattributes a game or feature, like when she suggests that Miyamoto made the 'A' button on the N64 controller larger to stress its importance (it was actually the GameCube controller). Fair enough, it's nit-picky, but gamers are by-and-large renowned for picking nits. Given the broad appeal of the subject matter and its generally accessible tone, which will likely give it a much broader reach than the usual academic tome, the broader gaming public are much more likely to come into contact with this work.

Notes

[1] For more information on the Platform Studies series see: https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/platform-studies.

[2] Miyamoto's 1999 Game Developer Conference Keynote Address can be viewed here: http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1014846/Conference-Keynote-Shigeru

Having formerly studied literature and film Dean Bowman continues to slip down the cultural taste hierarchy by studying a PhD on narrative in videogames at the University of East Anglia, where he hopes to launch a coup to overthrow the media department and replace it with game studies. He is particularly interested in games that subvert the medium or attempt to tell stories in innovative ways, such as *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, *Dark Souls* and *Bioshock*. In his spare time he is deputy editor of the long running community videogame blog www.ready-up.net, where he co-hosts their fortnightly podcast. Somehow he also manages to find time to lend a hand editing *Intensities*.

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