Shigeru Miyamoto

Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda

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Foreword

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During the initial rise of video gaming, most players would have been hard-pressed to name a game designer. While company founders like Nolan Bushnell and H. R. "Pete" Kaufmann made the news with some regularity, the design of games was treated as a technical practice, and titles by and large went uncredited, their designers anonymous and unknown. These same designers were often jacks-of-all-trades, responsible not only for the game's design, but also for its writing, artwork, music, and sound. Warren Robinett's act of defiance, the planting of his own name inside Atari's *Adventure*, was an impulsive protest of the anonymity. After all, Robinett's effort to cram the complicated game into the cartridge's limited memory space was an act of technological wizardry for which he, like his colleagues, would receive little to no formal recognition or reward. Robinett's hidden signature became the first discovered Easter egg in video game history, and Robinett has gone down in the annals of game history as a skilled designer.

In the years between Robinett's subversive effort to include his John Hancock in *Adventure* and the present, the role of the game designer has become increasingly visible. Designers are interviewed in magazines and they sit on panels at conferences. They are recognized and increasingly organized. The International Game Developers Association now boasts over 12,000 members worldwide. Game design programs abound at universities across the United States and across the globe; there are so many that the *Princeton Review*, long-standing quantifier of higher education program quality, now offers rankings of game design programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The professionalization of the game industry has brought with it a growing awareness and visibility of game designers.

In launching this series on influential game designers, we aim to contribute to the study of and discourse surrounding game design by focusing on human agents. This series derived from a simple question: What would it mean to consider game designers the way we frequently consider film directors? So often, discourse around game design has to do with design components: how to integrate puzzles, how to write a game story, how to design a level. This approach, of course, has value, situated as it is in teaching the basic mechanics of game creation. However, designers concern themselves not with the component parts but with the whole experience, translating those experiences into systems. The act of play turns systems back into experiences, there for players to share with the game designer's vision. Influential game designers create new systems, new experiences, shaping future games and the experiences of players.

This is not a charge into the churning debate of whether or not games are art; rather, it is an invitation to consider the creative labor of game design on its own merits. Game design is an act of creation, of building, of communication, of cultural production, and, of course, of design. That process of creation is worthy of study in its own right. The impact of games is well documented. Specific games such as *World of Warcraft* or *BioShock* or specific genres such as first-person shooters or RPGs receive careful consideration. The impact of game designers—of the people who engineer the stories and experiences that drive those same games—should be equally obvious; yet it remains understudied. Creative vision remains fairly invisible. The problem with this is that agency also becomes invisible. Contemporary discussions tend to focus on games as agents, teaching sexism or violence through nefarious channels to an always-susceptible audience. Or it focuses on players, agents in their own actions and interactions with games and possibly to other players. The absence of the designer may have to do with an extension of Barthes' 1967 "Death of the Author" argument. In this, Barthes argues that we cannot know author intentionality and that meaning cannot be parsed through biographical data. Rather, every reading of a text always happens here and now, interpreted through the very specific context of consumption. And this has great resonance with game studies, which emphasizes the agency of the player in cocreating a game through play. No game is the same because no play session is the same. We do not disagree with this, yet we cannot ignore that many of these game designers, these authors, are in fact not dead. They had intentions, visions, and experiences that they encoded into the game, and they negotiated those with the player through the medium of television, arcade, and computer.

We have chosen to launch this series with a book on one of the best known of game designers, Shigeru Miyamoto, the mastermind behind such iconic and long-standing game franchises as Donkey Kong, Mario Bros., and Zelda. We argue here that even when we are talking about complicated systems of production and distribution, it's imperative to think about how human agency plays out. Thus, as we develop the historiography of games, we provide a focus on design through the lens of the designer. Miyamoto, then, is a particular provocative subject because of his involvement in both the design of game software and game hardware. Further, his career, dating from the 1970s, spans much of the history of video games. His influence can be seen throughout the game industry—he has created and defined a number of game genres—and throughout popular cultures at large. Miyamoto's games and systems show up in other forms in movies, television, magazines, books, orchestras, schools, dance clubs, rap music, and children's lunch boxes. And as Chapter 1 indicates in the title, Miyamoto makes perfect sense for the inaugural book of the Influential Game Designers book series: He is the father of modern video games.