

Gamegeschiedenis van Nederland 1978–2018



Tom Lenting

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Tom Lenting's book *Gamegeschiedenis van Nederland 1978–2018* is best described as what Suominen has termed an enthusiast genre of game history.¹ Although books in this genre typically lack in academic rigour and critical reflection, they are valuable companion pieces that chronologically outline highlights in game history. In line with this, Lenting does a wonderful job describing the different author figures in the Dutch game industry as well as the developments in hardware with

the accompanying games worth mentioning. The book, while only seventy pages of running text (including illustrations), is filled with interesting – although sometimes small and trivial – facts on the intricate web of game developers, hardware developers, (lack of) publishers, and institutions concerned with more symbolic production (i.e. journalism, education, and even an e-sport athlete). With a world awash with books on game history from a US and Japanese perspective, this is a work that was desperately needed. As such, its value lies first and foremost in turning the spotlight on Dutch game history for the public at large.²

The book starts the story of Dutch games in 1978 with the release of the *Magnavox Odyssey2*, also known as *Philips Videopac G7000*. This tie-in with popular Dutch hardware is a smart structuring device allowing for a short reflection on the pre-1978 history (with Philips' take-over of Magnavox in 1974) and a recognition of the Philips CD-i as the most noteworthy Dutch gaming/multimedia technology (chapter 5). Quickly, however, the connection to Dutch hardware shifts towards a connection to hardware in general and is finally let go in favour of a more author-centred approach to writing game history. While again this makes sense, given the growing number of hardware devices in later years, Lenting's history becomes a little baffling with seemingly endless lists of developers being discussed. In these later chapters, Lenting chooses to categorise developers thematically (i.e., casual, serious, indie game, and developers with

internationally successful titles) but the stronger, most comprehensive chapters of the book remain at the beginning.

In these early chapters the number of developers are fathomable, leaving more room for a discussion of their achievements and their role in shaping the Dutch gaming landscape. Developers like *Radarsoft* and *Aackosoft* are discussed at length in chapter 3 with Lenting showing how these developers almost solely developed for the Commodore 64 and MSX-platform. While at first this sounds like a trivial fact, Lenting convincingly argues that this popularity of home computers and a strong cracker scene and demo scene (chapter 4) put the focus of the Dutch gaming industry firmly on the side of PC games (as opposed to console games). This focus is emphasised by the fact that there have traditionally been no big console game publishers in the Netherlands, pushing the development of non-PC games back (with a few notable exceptions of course – see chapter 6) to the coming of online distribution platforms (see chapter 8). The industry's focus on PC games also allows Lenting to discuss the role of early computer magazines and clubs like *Microcomputer Club Nederland* (MCN) (chapter 3). And finally Lenting traces the origins of the prominent serious gaming sector in the Netherlands back to this focus on PC games (together with other reasons such as governmental subsidies, a small sales market, and Philips' long-running tradition in both education and entertainment).

While the book remains rather factual in its chronicling of the Dutch industry, it is in these smaller analytical snippets where the book addresses the (to me) most interesting question: is there a 'Dutchness' to Dutch games and the Dutch game industry? Lenting first gives a general answer by recognising that serious

games and PC games have dominated the gaming landscape, but here the book (and follow-up research) could do more. Could we for instance recognise a specific style or choice of content in Dutch games like we recognise in Dutch films? And could we trace this 'Dutchness' back to specific crossroads in history of the Dutch industry? In fact, Lenting's brief mention of the e-sport athlete 'Grubby' and the current success of e-sport athletes in the Netherlands raises even broader questions such as: could we recognise Dutch playing styles or playing preferences (similar to how we recognise national playing styles in football teams)?

Perhaps that a more detailed categorisation of the many games that Lenting discusses will provide a preliminary answer to such questions but it would also be interesting to dive into the Dutch history of electromechanical amusement on fairgrounds, Luna Parks, and early arcade halls. Although the two-page opening chapter, which officially falls outside of the 1978–2018 scope of the book, briefly recognises this pre-history of Dutch games, it mostly begs further research. For example, it would have been interesting to read about the role of the, currently not discussed, Dutch Hommerson company which has a long tradition in making and operating different types of coin-ops and other electromechanical amusement, most notably the one on the pier in Scheveningen.³ Such a history may well have positioned games within a very different tradition, framing them as morally questionable amusement for the masses⁴ (in terms of alcohol consumption, sex, gambling and even animal cruelty) but perhaps also as sensory experiences in line with early cinematic practices (e.g. peep shows and nickelodeons). All this may provide other interesting starting points in finding the 'Dutchness' of Dutch games.

Lenting clearly frames Dutch games as technology (rather than for instance visual culture) by connecting them to hardware and tracing them back to bedroom coders in the demo scene. While this is a completely valid perspective, it also runs the risk of setting them apart from other broader cultural frameworks (like their connection to fairgrounds mentioned above or coinciding artistic trends). Here, the book's greatest strength is also immediately its greatest weakness. In Lenting's incredibly ambitious aim to share what he knows about the entire history of Dutch digital games, the work provides a wonderful overview but lacks in analytical depth. As a compendium, the book

certainly serves its purpose in familiarising the public at large with Dutch game history. Also, initiatives like the tri-annual Games Monitor by the Dutch Game Garden⁵ and the museum of Sound and Vision's (Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid) game archival efforts,⁶ would certainly find this book of great use. However, since history writing is always a process of inclusion and exclusion, more reflection is needed on the choices made and more analysis is needed on the story that this Dutch game history is telling. Lenting's book seems like a good place to start these endeavours.

Jasper van Vught, Utrecht University

Notes

1. Jaakko Suominen, "How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 544–562.
2. For this reason it would also be good to have it more widely available than only on the publisher's website: <https://sites.google.com/view/karel-van-mander-academy/publications-catalogue>.
3. Lex Dalen Gilhuys, *Hommerson. 50 jaar Scheveningen* (n.p.: n.p., 1986). See: <http://www.hommerson.nl/>

[files/folder/brochure-120jaar/files/assets/common/downloads/publication.pdf](https://www.beeldengeluid.nl/en/knowledge/projects/game-on).

4. Erkki Huhtamo, "Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble: An Archeology of Arcade Gaming," in *The Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 3–21.
5. See: <https://www.dutchgamegarden.nl/project/games-monitor/>.
6. See: <https://www.beeldengeluid.nl/en/knowledge/projects/game-on>.