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The diversity of computer games research

Torill Elvira Mortensen

Perceiving Play: The Art and Study of Computer Games

New York: Peter Lang, 2009

According to its author, *Perceiving Play: The Art and Study of Computer Games* «gives a quick and not quite exhaustive overview of this rapidly growing field [of computer games research]» (p. 1). Much of the discussion in the book is indeed simply introductions to the main perspectives of the study of games supported by examples. However, some parts of the book offer original research that could be used in more robust research. Chapter 4, for example, presents a strong argument for game aesthetics, while Chapter 5 is an exemplary analysis of the gendered meaning of role-playing games. In general, the latter part of the book is more comprehensive than the first.

Mortensen notes that at the time the book was published games research had reached a critical point in terms of the accumulation of basic research. Her work is one of several textbooks on game studies (e.g. Carr, Buckingham, Burn and Schott 2006; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; King and Krzywinska 2006; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2008; Mäyrä 2008). Of these works, *Perceiving Play* is particularly informative in its many-sided exploration into why games are unique and require various complementary research methods. The book explores the multidisciplinary nature of the field from the point of view of media studies and the humanities, thus disregarding the views of engineering scientists and design researchers.

The first of six chapters, «The Nature of the Game», setting up a working definition for a computer game, is about the particularity of computer games and the characteristics and elements that they constitute. Here, seminal definitions of play by Johan Huizinga (1950) and Roger Caillois (1961) are taken as primary sources, while the more recent body of work on the topic is largely neglected. The chapter

therefore seems disconnected with later developments in the debate on game studies. In the second half, differences between games dependent on technology and games that can be transferred from medium to medium are described. Subsequently, an analysis of Project Rub for Nintendo DS reveals the ways in which the specific dual touch-screen technology of DS impacts on the design and play of the game.

In Chapter 2, «Computer Game Genres», the author's native discipline, Media Studies, is perhaps more present than in the rest of the book. Mortensen does not try to fit games into existing theories of genres of other media, however, and in the end rejects the term altogether. It is suggested that games are better categorized based on typologies, while the use of genre definitions might be beneficial in their marketing and design.

The third chapter, «Game Criticism», explores a whole range of methods of analysing games. Along with Chapter 5, this is where the interdisciplinary nature of game studies is illustrated most profoundly, with the structure, experience, textual aspects and statistics of games each analysed separately. 'Other approaches' are suggested in addition, including studies of gameplay in the field of psychology. While few examples are given of each research tradition, an unfair view is established of the psychological study of games, because the one study mentioned is criticized for its shortcomings, i.e. criticism based on perhaps the most important mantra of game studies: namely, that the person studying games simply has to play games in order to fully understand them.

Chapter 4, «Game Aesthetics», starts with an introduction to aesthetics and art, and follows with questions of high and low cultural forms. The different ways in which games can be discussed in terms of aesthetics, game graphics, systemic beauty and narratives are explored. Exceptionally, yet successfully, Mortensen completes the chapter with a ten-page summary of an article by Jan Van Looy (2003) exemplifying the aesthetic analysis of a game entitled «Head over Heels».

The longest chapter, Chapter 5 entitled «The Use of Games», continues to explore computer games research methods and methodologies and concentrates on the players and player cultures rather than on an analysis and critique of the game artifact. It is a discussion of what it means to be a player, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and a summary of an article by Corneliussen and Mortensen (2005), whose earlier study on the meanings of gender in the game «Neverwinter Nights», works well as an example of game cultural analysis and of research conducted with and among players. It also shows the author's genuine interest in playing the games she writes about.

The last chapter of the book, «You Lost, High Score 1135», identifies emerging themes in the field of computer games research and touches on how games are built on novel technologies and on the possibilities games have as an art form. In a section on games in the future, «Are Games the Future» concludes with how games are now an established form of entertainment and suggests how games

may even have a role in sustainable future since the experiences they offer are not material per se.

Editing, spelling and referencing errors, which are many, will I am sure be dealt with in future editions of the book, and, if intended as a textbook, *Perceiving Play* would greatly benefit from signposting and cross-referencing throughout.

I recommend Mortensen's book as an introduction to readers not yet familiar with the study of games, especially with the methods used. Although the target audience is not clear from the Introduction, I read it as a textbook of games research – and of its methodologies discussing games research – primarily as a work addressed to readers new to this field of study. A few games and game-specific terms are left without much introduction and may confuse the reader with no prior experience of games. It also has to be said that the book does not discuss games alongside existing theories of (new) media, but rather concentrates on the existing body of computer games research.

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