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Professional Resource:

Missions for Thoughtful Gamers (2011)

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Missions for Thoughtful Gamers by Andrew Cutting. (2011). ETC Press: Pittsburgh, PA.

In an expanding universe of Game Studies literature, new audiences are coming to light almost as fast as the books are being written. There are the game designers, and the best practice guides for grabbing and holding attention through flow states and choice architecture; the educators, and the manuals dating back to the works of John Dewey prescribing games as a way of scaffolding the social control needed for instances of communal experiential learning; the cultural theorists and social scientists, and the theory guides for understanding a world in which perhaps “the game has colonized its rivals within the cultural realm, from the spectacle of the cinema to the simulations of the television” (Wark 7); and the skeptical general public, inundated by literature usually subtitled with some variation of “why videogames matter.”

This is just a sample—often overlapping—of the dominant readerships of this highly interdisciplinary genre. But there is a large audience group often missing from the crosshairs of Game Studies literature: the self-avowed, non-specialist gamer. Though gamers share an almost unrivaled body of online writing—from blogs and forums to in-game chat areas and public commons—published works written to address gamers themselves on an intimate level are rare. This is why Andrew Cutting’s book, *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers*, written explicitly for those who see themselves as (in his words) “Sworn Gamers,” is, due to its mere existence, a notable addition to Game Studies literature.

In the end, however, this fact seems to distract Cutting from making any substantial claims for what *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers* is actually meant to do. Thus, the book ultimately fails to justify itself, as it

fails to answer, or even ask, an essential question: *What is the value (either to society or to oneself) in being a “Thoughtful Gamer”*—a term Cutting spends much time writing about, though never fully defining. Are these gamers who want to understand their own lives better? Gamers who want to understand games better? Or some mysterious combination of both? Perhaps the answer to this question would be self-evident if the book were about how games can accomplish feats in one’s life or make the world a better place. Rather, the book is more interested in presenting itself as a mechanism for self-discovery, and as such, requires a discussion of what one might in fact be “discovering.” Cutting fails to give a hint as to what this might be, and thus makes it quite difficult to follow the text as he leaps around assumptions and assertions. Despite this failing, the book does contain a number of fascinating thought and design experiments (what Cutting calls *missions*) that would provide fascinating fodder in classroom discussions of games, game design, and theory—though perhaps only as a supplement to another text that is more willing to delve into and ask questions about the issues that lie at the heart of Game Studies.

In lieu of this deeper discussion, Cutting spends much of the first part of the book waxing poetically about the specific audience he has in mind: the Sworn Gamer, “committed to treating all life as primarily or nothing but a game,” even when “faced by personal and national crises such as imprisonment, bereavement, terminal illness, catastrophic natural disaster, or civil war” (3). Cutting makes it clear that he is not trying to create this person or cause sudden epistemological shifts in readers through arguments and evidence about the benefits of living life through the lens of games and play. Instead, he states his goal (vaguely) as taking this already-Sworn Gamer and developing him or her into

a Thoughtful Gamer and eventually a *playthinker*. To become a Thoughtful Gamer, Cutting suggests creating and swearing by one's own *Gamer's Oath*. One possible Gamer's Oath is provided: "I seek to play here, now, everywhere, and always. Accepting that playfulness is for me an essential part of a sane response to human existence, I recognize the sacred duty of expressing and evolving the spirit of gaming" (8). Cutting presents the book, then, as a tool for gamers in helping them both write their own Oaths and to "bridge the apparent gulf between everyday enjoyment of gaming, so often explained away under the catch-all label of 'fun,' and big philosophical questions such as Who am I? What is it like to be me in this world? What is real? What is true? What makes a good life?" (8).

In an attempt to answer these questions both for oneself and for others, Cutting then shifts again and invites the reader to take on the role of playthinker: "a thinker who plays or a player who thinks; someone who plays at thinking, someone who thinks by playing" (17). As playthinkers, gamers are asked to join Cutting in his project of "undertaking missions in game play, design, analysis, criticism, and research" and to "better understand themselves as part of the historical mainstream of human experience and to find how to express this understanding using, so far as possible, non-specialist language that's comprehensible to gamers and non-gamers alike" (17).

It is clear that Cutting's book is not for skeptics, and falls far short of providing convincing arguments for game-based approaches to problems or as foundations of epistemologies. Cutting even acknowledges as much, writing that the book does not try to answer questions that deal with the *kind* of thinker a Thoughtful Gamer is, or how the habits that gaming instills (never discussed) enable or constrain an understanding of oneself and the world (19). It is the unwillingness to discuss these essential issues that, for skeptic and non-skeptic alike, leaves one desperately wanting more. For those interested in comprehensive discussions of these arguments, one is better off reading Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken*, Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* and *How to Do Things with Videogames*, Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play*, or Frans Mayra's *An Introduction to Game Studies*. In *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers*, Cutting cuts through the doubt and skepticism and brushes it aside, writing a book of pure positive psychology (indeed, the book's set of exercises at times resembles a course of positive cognitive-behavioral therapy for gamers). Cutting's language implies the need for a leap

of faith in accepting gaming as an integral and positive part of living, but he, unfortunately, seems just fine leaving it at that.

In form, *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers* generally succeeds at being a text easily accessible to non-specialist gamers. He occasionally (though fleetingly) boils down theoretical concepts in ways non-specialists can easily understand (summoning, very fleetingly, postmodernism, phenomenology, Marshall McLuhan, and the other stalwarts of Game Studies), uses structure and syntax that mimics videogames (the book's sections have such titles as "Demo," "Tutorial," and "Boss Fight"), and permeates the book with a palpable love of games. The majority of the book is comprised of a sequence of forty "missions"—from thought experiments, to design exercises, to observations and self-reflections—that Cutting asks the reader to embark upon to arrive at a fuller understanding of oneself as a gamer.

The first set of missions deal with raising the gamer's critical awareness while playing a game, and vice versa—bringing a gaming awareness to everyday life. The first mission asks the reader to take a look around whatever room he or she is occupying and make the space a game-world. What can the space transform into (an obstacle course, a villain's fortress?), or what magical powers might the everyday objects around one have, and what challenges might one face (9)? Another mission asks readers to turn their life stories into an "autobiogame," observing all the game-like aspects of one's life—from the everyday (the challenges and incentives of getting out of bed) to the long-term (one's own character development, goals sought after, rewards for achieving them, failures, etc.) (39). Others ask the reader to "Keep a gamer's diary" (105) to heighten one's sense of self-awareness in games, to "Invite a character home" (113), and to "Observe your body playing" (123). In "Become a cyborg," Cutting makes the observation that "Gamers have firsthand experience of what it feel like to be a cyborg," with one's body forming a composite being with the videogame device, and asks us to contemplate upon this experience (119). Some missions ask us to take a critical look at traditional tropes and ideologies in games. The "Recenter a game's cultural perspective" mission asks the reader to "identify any stereotyped character in an existing videogame and explore what the game might look like when viewed from his or her perspective, brought into central position" (46). Another offers a fascinating challenge to "Conceive a Holocaust, civilian, or pacifist

war game,” and then asks the reader to explore the tensions between the often-used mechanic in games of restarting from a save point when “death” occurs, and the fact that atrocious death in these taboo subjects “will mean nothing if it can be undone by simply reloading the game” (58). Other cultural exploration missions ask the reader to think critically about certain tendencies rampant in the game industry, ranging from weapon fetishization and obsessions with the symbolic father, to the body types and storylines of tradition game “heroes.”

Many missions also ask the reader to think critically about form and composition in games. The “Auralize an audiogame” mission asks the reader to listen to a game and everyday life without watching, and think of ways to present game mechanics purely as sound (51). In “Play to lose,” Cutting issues a challenge popular among game designers: “Choose a type of videogame you enjoy and consider how you could rewrite its rules so that, in order to win, the player would need to do the opposite of what they would usually do” (89). Others include imagining what a 3D, graphics-intensive game would be like when rendered instead with stick people (154) and turning a digital game into an analogue game (157).

While Cutting creates a thought-provoking set of critical exercises, some of the biggest issues of videogame culture are noticeably left out. One such topic is women and videogames. Though he alludes to the “problem” a few times, Cutting never takes on this issue in any meaningful way (either in the form of a mission or his own commentary). He observes that many game narratives are centered on hyper-masculine men and hyper-sexualized women, but only addresses the lack of women in mainstream videogame design in a fleeting sentence in the mission on symbolic fathers: “If more women designed games, would we predict them to present mostly scenarios where the heroine kills an older woman in a mirror image of the Oedipal story?” (75). “If more women designed games” is the tip of the iceberg of perhaps the central cultural issue plaguing the videogame industry and the negative perceptions many outsiders have of it. Thus, this timely issue becomes no more than an elephant in the room in a book that touches upon virtually every other topic under the pixelated sun.

Cutting writes that *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers* could “usefully form a part of an Introductory Course in Game Studies” (19). That the book does ask the reader to carry out exercises that are themselves rooted in the popular methods and critical lenses found

in Game Studies, this statement is valid. Thus, *Missions for Thoughtful Gamers* would be a good companion piece to a more comprehensive introductory book on Game Studies. For the critically-oriented, a more thoroughly argued approach to embracing gaming and playfulness as a fundamental way of seeing can be found in the book *Gamer Theory* by McKenzi Wark. And for a comprehensive look at the value games can have for both oneself and for society, Jane McGonigal’s book *Reality is Broken* is the gold standard of our time for popular audiences.

Where Cutting’s book could find its most useful purpose is in the hands of a teacher—whether in a class focusing specifically on game design, a class founded on game-based learning principles, or any class in which a teacher engages with media literacy and wants to impart upon students a thoughtful and critical lens for viewing a world in which “videogames have seeped out of our computers and become enmeshed in our lives” (Bogost 8). While the book’s blind optimism and overwhelming positive psychology may block the isolated readers from developing this critical lens on their own, many of the missions provide excellent raw material from which a teacher could develop critical exercises and lessons for the classroom. Thus, while the book lacks a solid “campaign mode” overview that takes the reader through a narrative of why this is important, it regains some footing in its “arcade mode” of interesting thought experiments and design exercises that, though written explicitly for the nebulously-defined Sworn Gamer, will find some use in a classroom filled with students brought up in the age of the videogame.

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