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HOW TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES

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Mathew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann, Editors
New York University Press, NY, NY, 2019
400 pp., illus. 49 b/w. Trade, \$89; paper, \$30
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Reviewed by:

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From the very first sentence in the foreword, it is made very clear to the reader that the title of the book is supposed to be taken as a kind of joke. This joke is not just exclusive to this book though, as it is a *spiritual sequel* of sorts to the book *How to Watch Television* written by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (who also wrote this foreword). Neither book teaches the reader how they can primarily interact with each respective medium; although there certainly exists of plenty of walkthroughs as to how to complete a vast array of different videogames. Instead, the aim is to provide a series of digestible essays that use a particular videogame as its case study to 'provide a critical approach to understanding video games as popular culture'.

This book contains work from a wide range of notable contributors who have themselves published work ranging from 25+ page journal essays to 200+ page monographs, and here are providing shorter pieces of writing that will not only appeal to academics who likely have a pile of other reading they want to go through, but with the intention of engaging game design students with the literature as well.

The objective of this book is that critical concepts relating across the videogame medium can be neatly applied to a single videogame and unpacked effectively so that it can be understood more succinctly without having to read an in-depth journal essay or monograph. Whilst this might ordinarily rob each essay of the additional breadth each topic could benefit from, in this instance at the end of each one there is a helpful small list of suggested future reading that can expand that particular topic. This also has the added benefit of enabling the book as a whole to cover a very broad spectrum of elements that can be explored within both the videogames medium and industry. So much so that collectively this book feels like it could quite easily be used to provide the basis for numerous different modules on videogame or media degree programmes.

There are multiple sections that divide the book into different overarching themes, although as mentioned these are not crucial to understanding the core of each essay's argument. Furthermore, Mathew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann (the editors of the book) have done an excellent job of identifying where each author's argument relates

to one made by another in the book, meaning that even though the book covers a diverse range of games and themes, collectively it feels neatly joined together helping to form a cohesive narrative; even if read in a different order. This is partly because the editors even state in the introduction that given how often they rearranged the different chapters that it is perfectly acceptable for the reader to 'play' with the order and read the book in an order that suits them.

Each essay is predominantly based around one videogame or videogame series and is paired with a theme, for example, *Shovel Knight* with Nostalgia, this acts as the lens through which the videogame will be examined. Given that there are 40 individual essays contained within this book, this review does not address each individual one, nor does it highlight individual ones (aside from the example title given). This is because each essay in the collection adeptly covers both its specific theme and the videogame that was chosen to explore it.

You do not need to have played each individual game to understand the arguments being made as the authors have managed to introduce the main theme and mechanics of each in a way that facilitates the argument without being drawn into an overly descriptive unpacking of the game. This is not only beneficial to those who have played the videogame but also respects the time of those who have not, as well as not taking away too much about the experience of the videogame; something which readers might subsequently want to try out after having read about it.

The chapters also manage to facilitate a dialogue with the reader, generating questions in their mind for them to follow up. That does not mean that the text is left with unfinished answers, as each chapter has a clear ending, and it feels like each author has delivered their argument, therefore enabling the reader to follow up in their own time.

The result is a playful book that enables the reader to engage with the text in their own way and take what they need from it. Game design students might find a new way of thinking about how they might approach their upcoming projects, those already developing videogames could begin to re-examine their current design ideas for their next game, and give academics further thought when addressing their own research and ideas.

As a result, *How to Play Video Games* is an open book that can be what the reader needs it to be (within reason) helping them to examine videogames in a way they might not have considered before. The freedom to engage with this book ties itself in well with the inside joke that is the book's title, with the book becoming another thing that can be played with beyond the videogames we already play.

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