As the metabolism of the games research community has sped up in the digital age, we witness a proliferation of literature on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of game design. *Video Game Spaces* is one of the better books—primarily due to the interdisciplinary analytical approach employed by the author, Michael Nitsche. The book explores the effects of the spatial dimension on the structure, presentation, and functionality in 3D games, and, therefore, will be most relevant to those readers of IJGCMS who focus on theoretical approaches to 3D game design, particularly from the perspectives of narratology, philosophy, and media studies.

The publication of *Video Game Spaces* was well-timed. As more and more developers are converting their games to the 3D format (e.g., Blizzard’s *Warcraft®,* Nintendo’s *Mario®,* Ubisoft’s *Heroes of Might and Magic®*), Nitsche’s central thesis—that spatiality should be incorporated in the current approaches to game research, design, and evaluation—seems well-grounded. The introduction of a third dimension to game play has transformed the player’s experience, resulting in more complex representations of virtual worlds, stimulating imagination, and increasing cognitive and emotional engagement.

Recognizing that no single theory available today can do justice to a form as rich as the video game, Nitsche builds on prior research (e.g., Jenkins, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Murray, 1997; Qvortrup, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Wolf, 2002) to explore the spatiality of 3D games and propose a conceptual framework of navigable video game spaces. Considering that the main argument of this book is to encourage augmenting game theory with the concept of space, it seems that the reader would have benefited from a more explicit depiction of how Nitsche’s own understanding of 3D game design evolved while developing this framework.

Synthesizing literature in interdisciplinary games studies including philosophy, architecture, linguistics, psychology, and interaction design, Nitsche defines the spatial architecture of games as a multidimensional construct consisting of five layers or “planes”—rule-based space, mediated space, fictional space, play space, and social space. Although *Video Game Spaces* focuses on the discussion of 3D games,
it seems that Nitsche’s five-layer framework can be applied to the design and analysis of non-3D games. Each game space is a navigable virtual location (rather than a visual spectacle), which game players explore and interpret to make sense of the virtual world around them. Thus, experience, comprehension, and spatial practice make up the phenomenology of Nitsche’s perspective. This study of game spaces is empirical and pragmatic because it evaluates the spatiality of existing games and, for the most part, avoids unsupported claims and enthusiastic prophecies. The author includes a good number of personal anecdotes, which illuminate his perspective and validate, rather than confound, the treatment of the topic.

Analysis of the spatial architecture of video games may offer useful insights to IJGCMS readers on how 3D game spaces explicate rules, elicit narratives, and ultimately define game play as players navigate and interact with virtual locations. Nitsche conceptually guides the reader through the argument using Lefebvre’s typology of social spaces (1991), as experienced by the author himself in his theoretical explorations and practical experimentation with interactive media and games at the University of Cambridge and the Georgia Institute of Technology. Specifically, the book covers structure, presentation, and functionality—three important aspects of video games that resonate with Lefebvre’s spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. The first part of the book attempts to operationalize the concept of space. Parts two and three reveal Nitsche’s integrative view of spatial experience, relating a game’s audiovisual presentation to its functional interactive elements.

Structure provides a discussion of the effects of navigable 3D spaces on the textual qualities of video games, as informed by linguistics and narratology (e.g., Benveniste, 1971; Propp, 1968). This chapter should be of special interest to those readers who study games from the perspectives of discourse analysis, pragmatics, and semiotics of human-computer interaction. Nitsche describes video game spaces through the concepts of interaction and narrative, providing support for the proposal of understanding space and movement by ways of narrative comprehension. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Jenkins, 2005), Nitsche defines narrative as a form of understanding events encountered inside a video game space by the game player. Adopting this user-centric view of game play, the author launches a thought-provoking discussion of quests as a prime example of space-driven content structures that make up the narrative. Nitsche’s views seem to be influenced primarily by Campbell’s cyclic quest model and his idea of monomyth (1968), but it seems that the analysis of quests in this book would be more useful if the author had reviewed more of the current research on narrative and quests (e.g., Barton, 2008; Howard, 2008).

Presentation describes the expressive elements of video game spaces. This chapter will likely appeal to games researchers in media and communication, cognitive psychology, usability, graphic design, audio engineering, and educational technology. Nitsche compares 3D games with cinema and emphasizes the two primary audiovisual components of presentation in these two media—moving images and sound. Building on his discussion of the narrative structure of games, the author defines these presentation forms as “narrative filters” (p. 154), which frame the player’s interactions into specific contexts. To illustrate this conception, Nitsche explains how in Max Payne® complex audiovisual presentation is achieved with the help of the main character’s dream sequences that show Max’s old apartment. While in the technical sense this visualization remains external, an interactive following camera attempts to present Max’s internal perception of the surrounding world revealing the hero’s main motivation and emotionally connecting the player with the character. Nitsche’s review of presentation forms through the prism of scaffolding players’ comprehension of virtual spaces is useful because it explains how features like a fixed camera and predefined viewing panes (as in Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time®) or an interactive following camera and use of audio- and video-based story elements like

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dreams and memory flashbacks (as in Max Payne® and God of War®) function as an “external focalizer” to direct and focus attention on the pathway through the current game space. In this chapter the author touches upon some promising sound technologies—like adaptive audio and spatialized speech engines—but falls short of providing the depth of analysis that he demonstrates in the section on cinematic presentation forms and camera work.

Functionality completes Nitsche’s tri-chotomy of space. Nitsche’s treatment of the functionality aspect of video game spaces and its experiential effects like immersion and social presence may prove useful for the designers and researchers in architecture, virtual reality, social psychology, and cultural anthropology. This section compares virtual places with real-world locations and describes the affordances of video game spaces that determine the underlying rules of the game. Particularly strong is the author’s discussion of spatial structures like labyrinths and arenas through the models and metaphors of artificial intelligence, interface design, and interactive fiction. Nitsche describes labyrinths as complex spaces that constrain movement and complicate comprehension. In contrast, arenas are open structures, which provide free movement and serve as a canvas for performances (e.g., battles, dances, speeches) that demand skillful operation of the avatar, and collaboration or competition with others. Through their architectural affordances, video game locations become shared spaces that engage the player in unique ways and foster certain forms of interaction with the digital environment. Ultimately, the author concludes that the spatial design of video games and conditions that regulate access to various spatial structures are evocative narrative elements that demand and scaffold further exploration of the virtual world.

Nitsche’s skillful use of examples, metaphors, and parallels should help even a casual reader internalize the complex synthesis of interdisciplinary research that makes up the conceptual framework of Video Game Spaces. While overall the author succeeds in disambiguating his conceptions of space, interaction, and narrative, at times the reader is still required to make cognitive leaps in order to make sense of Nitsche’s operational definitions essential to the topic—like navigation. According to Nitsche, navigation is a central feature that differentiates 3D game spaces and other virtual spaces such as those described in written text or cinema. Unfortunately, there is no clear definition of this important concept in the book (and it is not included in the Index). This creates confusion because Nitsche’s view of navigation (p. 58) seems to be quite different from that of, say, a hypermedia researcher (e.g., Shapiro, 2008).

Navigation depends on structure, and the author provides an excellent analysis of the narrative structure of game spaces. At the same time, Nitsche claims that “no ultimate, dramatic über-structure can be defined for video games” (p. 57). There is no attempt to develop this argument relative to the models of structuring media artifacts that are discussed in the book (e.g., Campbell, 1968; Propp, 1968; Vogler, 1992) which leaves the reader “high and dry.” Another limitation of this work is the shortage of references back to the five layers of spatial architecture—rule-based space, mediated space, fictional space, play space, and social space—that were proposed in the Introduction. It seems that Nitsche’s treatment of structure, presentation, and functionality of video game spaces would have benefited from a more explicit application of this typology to his own analysis.

Despite these weaknesses, it is difficult to overstate Nitsche’s contribution to our understanding of video games as a culturally significant media form. This book seems immediately practical because at a time when most games are built as complex 3D spaces, it addresses the need for a well-researched interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing and designing meaningful spatial experiences in video games. Books on game theory are rapidly appearing (e.g., Kankaanranta & Neittaanmaki, 2008; Peters, 2008). Yet, it seems unlikely that many of them will provide the comprehensive treatment of interdisciplinary games research or the wealth of first-hand practical experience.
with 3D games that are offered by Video Game Spaces.

REFERENCES


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