Book Review
Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction

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The difficulty of making a general offering or introduction on the study of games is knowing where to start. The field of game studies brings together many professional and academic traditions to create often complex and dynamic interactive experiences that can be used to serve a multitude of purposes—this book begins to introduce the complexity that is the world of video games. Both, Game Studies as an academic discipline and the game production industry are trans-disciplinary fields—the study and production of video games bring together a variety of approaches and methods, language, and purpose to problem solving that are equally valid—the idea of trans-disciplinarity is very much like the story of the blind men and the elephant, where each is aware of a part of the elephant, but they need to work together and negotiate the whole beast. The authors Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca are successful in bringing together diverse perspectives from different academic perspectives and their constituent research methodologies to offer a trans-disciplinary approach.

The book is organized around a philosophical orientation on games and offers an ontological perspective to unify the many subfields of games such as graphics, marketing, play, human studies, and aesthetics. This opportunity this approach lends is the essential question as an organizing principle.

The book asks, “What is a game?” Rather than answering this question the authors lead the reader to explore this question through reviewed literature from publications with game studies as a focus – providing groundwork and some history without making the mistake of telling the reader the answer—instead they provide a framework of reviewed research from diverse perspectives to provide thoughtful discussion. Understanding Video Games, The Essential Introduction is just what it says it is – an essential introduction.

Through essential questions, an easy to read narrative and a great overview of the many ways that games are researched, how they are

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produced, and the people who play them, the book lays flat the complex landscape of gaming. The prose is fluid in style and easy to read—with sections that offer important topics from a variety of levels of purpose, organization, and scale: from games as artifacts; the history of video games; gaming industry issues and professional roles; the study of the individual player; games as stories, and the cultures that emerge and surround games. What this book does not propose to do is to suggest how to build a game, or be a game designer, but to be a student of games and engage in research and inquiry of games and the variety of approaches and methods available.

One of the areas of the book that could be built upon is the role of play and games in cognitive development and cognitive enhancement. Vygotsky (1976) proposed that play is a serious developmental strategy, and allows for understanding the constraints of a condition, and also to gain the ability to act independently of what is seen—creating new choices.

Thus play seems essential to development, and the role of the pivot (Vygotsky, ibid), a toy, representation, or even a game, is important in aiding the awareness of otherness, and may be an early example of creating mental models of the world that will later be used for inference and reasoning in hypothesis testing, de-contextualization and abstraction—allowing not only perception of the context, but perception of the situation and the relevance of that situation in a larger context, creating useful action with the act of perception, and also the act of making meaning.

Although serious treatment is given to cognitive learning outcomes in the Serious Games section of the book, there is a lack connection to psychological research and research on learning outcomes. This omission was likely purposeful since there seems to be a lack of research that supports games as effective instructional systems, even though we see games and play as essential behaviors for sharing and evolving cultural knowledge, beliefs, and expertise (Mumford, 1954).

With this said, there are tremendous opportunities for studies of learning efficacy, especially as other research traditions in the learning sciences begin to explore and report on their study of games. What may be especially fruitful will be the work of those who study video games as text and begin to recruit methods and theory from the comprehension and discourse processing tradition, which presents an enormous opportunity for those interested in conducting research on learning outcomes in cognition and social learning—sections in the book that would seem opportune areas for this connection are in the exploration of Narrative and Player Culture. Perhaps as these areas become more to the game studies community, the tradition of Discourse Processing, Cognitive Psychology, Cognitive Ethnography, Social Learning, and Cognitive Neuroscience will gain mention in the game studies arena.

This book is an excellent introduction for familiarization across disciplines as it begins to explain issues like the mathematical models, audio and imagery, as well the history of games as they developed from the infamous “Space Wars”, and may provide the basis for the kind of learning studies that are needed but have not been attempted, thus providing a great starting point for the Learning Studies oriented reader.

This book will connect the computer scientist with literature on player culture, and help the anthropological view to connect with the beginnings of the nuts and bolts of programming conceptualization. It is, as advertised, an essential introduction, and very useful for the various disciplinary players to connect to each part of the elephant that is video game production and study, without being a technical manual.

Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction is a well-crafted beginners guide for game studies, and will connect the beginner to the general field, and provide interest and overview to game studies as an emerging academic filed to those already involved in some aspect such as audio production, marketing, games as art forms, and the general research literature and traditions that all practitioners and students of games should be familiar with.
–beginning with the more time honored and established traditions of computer science, modeling and simulations, and play studies.

Overall, this book comes highly recommended. Especially for a game studies course that is more grounded in humanities and cultural studies. Understanding Video Games, The Essential Introduction provides a very useful overview, collection, and discussion of collected and reviewed research that is presented with essential questions and presents the value of game studies by questioning the need for it, and asking the question, “what is the role of games in society,” and perhaps implies the question, what would it be like to live without them?

REFERENCES


Brock R. Dubbels has worked since 1999 as a professional in education and instructional design. His specialties include reading comprehension and instruction and assessment. His current focus is on the role of embodied cognition connected with digital literacies, game design, and play. From these perspectives he designs face-to-face, virtual, and hybrid learning environments, exploring new technologies for assessment, delivering content, creating engagement with learners, and investigating ways people approach learning. He is currently a research associate at the Center for Cognitive Science at the University of Minnesota. He is also the founder and principal learning architect at www.vgalt.com.