
Video games have only emerged from the academic margins as legitimate objects of study in the past few years. Although computer scientists have been writing about video games for at least 30 years, they are now being joined by a great many colleagues in the social sciences and humanities who have turned their academic attentions to this rich medium.

As the field of video game studies grows, research groups, periodicals, and edited collections are starting to emerge that attempt to gather up the concepts and controversies common to the fledgling game studies community. One such collection is The Video Game Theory Reader, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. Wolf and Perron suggest in their introduction that this reader could not have come into being even a few years ago for want of both audience and authors. However, a review of this collection suggests that it may, in fact, have come a few years too soon.

The editors’ stated intent here is to bear witness to the diversity and importance of video game scholarship, as well as to work toward “agreed-upon theoretical foundations and a common vocabulary” (p. 13) among the scholars of the international video game research community. To this end, the editors have selected 15 papers to include here, representing writers from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Poland, the United States, and Uruguay. The list of authors is an interesting mix of senior academics, graduate students, video game designers, and independent writers. However, the scholarship across these chapters is decidedly uneven.

Most of the papers the editors have chosen are original and sophisticated offerings that have already begun to be well cited in the burgeoning game studies literature. These include “Theory by Design” by Walter Holland, Henry Jenkins, and Kurt Squire, a fitting first chapter that reflects on how the gap between game theory and practice might be bridged fruitfully. Also of note are papers by Martti Lahki and Mia Consalvo, entitled “As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games” and “Hot Dates and Fairy Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games” respectively. These two chapters both examine the relationship of the gamer to the game world through social and technological coding that scripts certain kinds of play and perspectives while precluding other kinds.

Perron’s and Wolf’s respective papers are also very strong, with Wolf’s “Abstraction in the Video Game” a particularly refreshing take. He highlights the untapped potential of abstraction in the design of games and suggests that a deliberate move away from representational graphic design would open up the greatest arena for potential new gaming experiences.

Perhaps the strongest paper in the collection is Bob Rehak’s “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar.” Rehak acknowledges that the application of psychoanalysis to mediated identity is an oversimplification of both, but he defends the crossing of these fields as unexpectedly productive. As a result, his analysis is a notably original and engaging exception to the rule represented by many other writings, which celebrate how game characters allow us to escape our skins and become whomever we wish. Instead Rehak reminds us that “[j]ust as one does not unproblematically equate a glove with the hand inside it, we should not presume the subjectivity produced by video games . . . to transparently correspond to, and thus substitute for, the player’s own” (p. 104-106). Rehak suggests that the site for resistance in video games is in this space between gamer and game avatar, where gamers can “think through questions of agency and existence, exploring in fantasy form aspects of their own materiality” (p. 123). In exploring this space of resistance and re-negotiation, Rehak guides us to see how “video games seem to offer the potential for profound redefinitions of body, mind and spirit” (p. 123).

Other papers in this collection are not as strong and seem out of place. Miroslaw Fili- ciak’s “Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Games” has the potential to be interesting as the only paper in this collection with massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as a main focus. MMORPGs have become a very hot topic for many video game scholars, and excellent work has been done in this area by academics such as T. L. Taylor and the Montréal Game-CODE group. However, Filiciak’s thesis that only MMORPGs realize postmodern identity “in the most complete way,” by allowing us to “manipulate our ‘selves’ and to multiply them indefinitely” (p. 88) is disappointingly redundant. This argument has been made and largely foregone in favour of more sophisticated theorizing about the self and mediated identity, such as Lahki and Rehak provide in their contributions to this collection. As well, the foreword by Warren Robinett, designer of the Atari game “Adventure,” is entertaining in spots, but mostly self-congratulatory. The inclusion of writings by game designers is certainly a strength of this book, but they are better exemplified in the more thoughtful and productive papers written by Chris Crawford and Gonzalo Frasca.

Overall, The Video Game Theory Reader is a strong “first steps” collection. Wolf and Perron provide a good brief history of the field and call intelligently for more research on formal exploration, the economical and political functions of games, game ideologies, game reception, and the many potential uses of games for education, training, avant-garde experimentation, and academic theorizing. The book succeeds in being one of the first to devote itself solely to games research and theory with interesting ruminations by both young theorists and more recognized academics. However, to call it “the reader” on this topic seems overambitious. The collection is relatively small and only focuses on a few areas of possible work on games, namely design theory, the gamer/game-character relationship, and the ongoing debate around whether games are more about narrative or simulation. One area of paucity is in feminist scholarship, with Consalvo’s study of heteronormative sexuality in games the closest brush to be found in this book. This becomes a more striking omission upon reading in Robinett’s foreword that games have not really changed much in the past few decades because “little boys haven’t changed (not even the ones who are now thirty or forty). They still like to blow up bad guys, fight scary monsters and drive noisy, powerful vehicles” (p. xix). That boys or men might enjoy different kinds of games or that women or girls play them at all does not seem to occur to Robinett, despite his suggestion that “[i]t’s a good time for video game theorists . . . to question old dogmas” (p. xix). In addition, the emergence of the Scandinavian countries as an important hotbed for video game studies is aptly reflected here, but the absence of papers from Asian contributors is odd given the importance of Japanese culture and design, especially in the short history of the medium.

As a “reader,” this collection could use more organization, topic variety, and cross-awareness between papers. Perhaps the most obvious example of this last shortcoming is in the multiple times the various authors define “paidia and ludus,” or play and gaming. At least four consecutive papers devote ink to defining these terms at length, leaving the reader to wish the editors had edited a bit more. Finally, there is an abruptness to the end of the collection that leaves an unfinished taste to the project. A paper that tied together some of the theoretical threads or suggested more future directions for the young field would have been a fitting and most welcome wrap-up.

As a Routledge publication, The Video Game Theory Reader follows The Cybercultures Reader (2000), The Visual Culture Reader (2002), The Cybertocities Reader (2004), The Terrorism Reader (2001), The Gender and Science Reader (2001), The Television Studies Reader (2003), and The Everyday Life Reader (2002), to name just a very few. Given this proliferation of Routledge “reader” collections in the past 10 years, it seems that the labelling of this book as such was perhaps not primarily the editors’ intention. Wolf and Perron speculate in their introduction on when the terms and theoretical foundations of the field will arise, and they recognize that it is “certainly beyond the scope of this introduction
to attempt to address such a question in full,” but that “we might examine a few starting points” (p. 13). The Video Game Theory Reader does just that as a strong collection of exploratory papers and first stabs at some of the field’s key debates. Although video game studies is too young yet for a true reader, this book is a valuable collection of critical threads on the game genre and an essential read for scholars interested in this new and exciting field.

Lauren Cruikshank
York University