

BOOK REVIEW

The Medium of the Video Game. Edited by Mark J. P. Wolf. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002, ISBN 0–292–79148–8, 203 pages, \$45.00 (cloth); ISBN 0–292–79150–X, 203 pages, \$19.95 (paper).

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The Medium of the Video Game, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf, is a collection of mostly scholarly articles on video games with no central thematic other than the topic. The book is five doses film theory, and one dose each of journalistic history, museum curation, cultural commentary, and psychoanalysis. Those who have never played or seen more than a handful of games may appreciate Wolf's descriptive sections and find journalist Steven L. Kent's brief history accessible and to the point. Those who are less interested in categorization schemes will find good insights in the last three chapters, which deal more with social and cultural analysis. Those looking for insights into what makes a medium, how video games are a medium, or how video games might constitute an interpersonal communications system will be disappointed.

Readers looking for a historical understanding will benefit from Ralph H. Baer's introduction. Combined with Kent's brief history chapter, the material gives a competent overview of industry history, and would suffice as introductory material for an undergraduate classroom. A more comprehensive nuts-and-bolts version of industry history can be found in the decidedly unscholarly *Phoenix* (Herman, 1997). Those looking for a richer social constructivist approach would do well to get a copy of Steve Levy's *Hackers* (Levy, 1994) or Kent's own *The First Quarter* (Kent, 2000), the latter of which contains scores of entertaining and enlightening interviews.

Unfortunately, Wolf's film theory chapters that dominate the book are the least useful for scholars looking for insight and analysis on this important and understudied medium. The material is an extension of Wolf's *Film Quarterly* article (Wolf, 1997) that adds essays on time and narrative. My quibble with this material is not the theoretical approach or even the deliberate style, but with the nearly total lack of analysis. Wolf sets out to create a taxonomy of space, time, genre, and narrative for video games, and he does this arguably well. What's missing is any use of the newly created taxonomy or answers to the many questions the system implies.

Much of the film theory-based material is simple atheoretical description that few will find enlightening. The 10 pages describing different physical screen types, for example, will do little to advance scholarship. Another chapter illustrates that time passes within games, that games can be restarted or paused, and that some games have devices to convey time pressure. It takes still another entire chapter to learn that some games are text-based, some move side-to-side, and others feature still different combinations of movement, restriction, and path. For scholars of film or visual culture, these descriptions might represent an interesting starting point for analysis, but any implications are left unstated. For example, the various kinds of spaces in video games might be very important as parameters for social interaction and cultural expression. Some game architectures clearly allow some kinds of human and artistic interactions and expressions whereas others do not—an extension of Lawrence Lessig's (1999) "Code is Law" idea. However, this connection is not made. Scholars reading from non-film theory related disciplines will scratch their heads, and game players and programmers will find it all patently obvious, but readers completely unfamiliar with games should find it a useful starting point.

Wolf's chapter on genre classification is detailed and exhaustive, and begins to fill a hole in the literature. A workable taxonomy–typology of content is a drastically needed tool for effects scholars, who for far too long have collapsed all games into one category of stimulus. But at 42 genres, Wolf's scheme is too lengthy and unwieldy, and it does not match the less rigorous but widely used industry typology. In the tradeoff between specificity and usability, Wolf veers too much to the former. If a game, such as *Diablo* (1999), fits six separate genres, it's not clear how useful the classification system is.

The balance of the book is thematically unrelated to Wolf's and the historical material, but is interesting in its own right. Readers will find more depth and insight in Cassell and Jenkins' *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999), Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy* (Poole, 2000), or J. C. Herz's less scholarly but lively and insightful *Joystick Nation* (Herz, 1997), but there are new contributions here.

Rochelle Slovin's chapter on a gaming museum exhibition is an insightful view of how games have slowly entered the public consciousness as an accepted medium, and of the importance of the physicality of arcades that echoes Herz's work. She draws interesting parallels with early movie (nickelodeon) history.

Charles Bernstein's essay on games in culture is probably the best chapter in the book. Bernstein has novel ideas about how games play a role in culture, and how we view media as a culture—their roles and functions, and how that plays out through cultural warfare, stereotyping, and use. He also offers a Sherry Turkle-like examination of why games appeal and how we interact with computing technology, that is, what role it plays in our everyday psychology of coping with a complicated and daunting world.

Finally, Rebecca R. Tews' brief review of the social psychological literature on gaming provides an argument for why Jungian analysis is useful for understanding

the impact of gaming. Although her arguments are sound, readers should not rely on her review as particularly comprehensive, and would be better served reading one of the recently published overviews or meta-analyses of the research literature (e.g., Dill & Dill, 1998).

The book concludes with a helpful list of web-based (which leaves out the very useful allgame.com) and book resources for researchers. The periodicals, however, are skimpy—most are popular press articles and there are many articles in the communications, humanities, and especially the social science journals that are not included.

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