

*Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*

By Diane Carr, David Buckingham, Andrew Burn, and Gareth Schott

Polity Press 2006

ISBN-10: 0-7456-3401-X (paperback)

210pp

Computer games are addictive and great fun. A lot of people of all ages spend a lot of time on them. Vast amounts of money is made by the games industry: there are millions of game consoles, and many games make money directly for their owners, by sales, subscription and, increasingly, gambling. It isn't obvious what a *computer* game is, though. Should we include simulation of a casino as a computer game?

Once we pin down what computer games are, it's interesting to know how they differ from and develop other sorts of experience, such as watching film, reading books, or playing other sorts of games, whether wargames, football or interactive theatre. We might want to make better games, or criticise current games. Clearly, violence in computer games is an issue of social concern. Is violence a significant issue? What can we do about it, if it is? Can games be justified because children get useful experience using modern technology?

Indeed, there are many profound and interesting questions in this field. It's a shame there aren't answers to them in this book. The book claims to be an introduction to applying literary, media, and film theory to computer games, but it makes no concessions to the new researcher entering the field. It claims to provide a variety of tools for games research, but it never explains any of the tools. There is negligible reflection on the field of game studies as such; there is nothing to help or motivate a student to engage with the subject. Topics (such as Freud's ideas) are broached, then dismissed as irrelevant. A book is hard to read when it repeatedly cites publications without explaining what they say or why they say it. This multi-author book has been written in the voice of a research report, not for a wider readership.

Nevertheless *Computer Games* certainly shows that there are many ways of talking about, if not rigorously analysing, games and games culture. It may well be a useful resource for people wanting to enter the field of games studies, though mainly because it raises issues it then fails to address with either clarity or rigour.

For example, the book claims its primary aim is to provide concepts that can be used in empirical analysis. One chapter explores a few comments from a 17 year old girl. This is empirical data only in a limited sense; we are not told whether this girl is typical or representative of any population. Indeed, women are generally less forthcoming when interviewed about games than men.

There are millions of game players and thousands of games. Why not do a rigorous survey and get data more reliable than can be got from one or two users' and designers' opinions about a few games, or at least argue more carefully from what is known?

A later chapter asserts that women are alienated, disenfranchised and that game culture is sexist. We are told that in the UK, 27.2% of gamers are 30–35 year old women, but in Korea an "astounding" 65.9% of women play. But we aren't told the age profile of these Korean women (maybe more than two thirds of UK women of the same age play?) and we aren't told how the rate compares to the rates for men of any age group in any country. What definitions of games were used? We aren't told whether the figures are for, say, gambling in Korea but role playing in the UK. Thus these figures, at least as presented in the book, don't support any claim that one or another gender is alienated — whether or not it is in fact true that any people are actually alienated. Why not relate games usage to sociocultural sex roles rather than to physical sex; why not evaluate alienation rather than assume it follows from numerical differences? The issues, like many topics touched in the book, if we want to take them seriously, need grounding in better studies rather than asseveration and not quite telling us enough.

In short, if you thought computer games were addictive, this book is the antidote.

Prof Harold Thimbleby is Director of the Future Interaction Technology Lab, Swansea University. His book *Press On* will be published by MIT Press in 2007. He programmed his first games in the 1960s.