Fun, Taste &amp; Games: An Aesthetics of the Idle, Unproductive, and Otherwise Playful.

John Sharp and David Thomas

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019. On thinking playfully, preface, notes, bibliography, and index.

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‘Fun is probably one of the most (over) used words in game design discourse… It’s also a broad, non-specific, subjective term that actually doesn’t actually tell us anything meaningful about a game experience’

Pete Garcin.

Is it fun to review a book about fun? This latest in MIT’s Playful Thinking series comprises a series of essays and provocations that address fun through a composite lens, and allows the reader to challenge their own, possibly rather staid, idea of what it is to have fun whilst being playful.

Given that the authors seem fairly sure that fun is frequently lost or ignored in the serious business of games design – often because it is seen as too vaguely nebulous to pin down and too highly subjective to be useful – they manage to assemble several persuasive oppositional takes to these conjectures. In a series of essays, mediations and provocations, including a deep dive into the history of aesthetics and design in games, a chapter examining various definitions of aesthetics and fun from games scholars, and a meditation on why the Hamilton Building in Denver doesn’t have slides (the playground version, not the projected type), they examine how fun can be used to philosophically re-evaluate our understanding of games and play.

The various writings in the book are able to address these, and other more flippant responses to fun, through a confident tone that is embedded clearly in a bedrock of gaming thought and philosophy. There is a great deal of quiet scholarship in the writing that allows these arguments and considerations to emerge, and the work also gives valuable, although not exhaustive contextual thought for those not embedded within Games Studies. This is something of a relief, as many Games Studies books still feel the need to overexplain concepts and theories that are now well trodden enough not to need a vast amount of elaboration. The freshness of this writing also means that it can be very exuberant – and to answer my first question – yes, it is fun to read this book.

The authors identify three aspects needed for fun, aspects which allow them to follow a series of explorations of fun in subsequent essays. These are Set Outsideness, which set the preconditions for fun; Ludic Forms, which enable the potentials for fun, and Ambiguity, through which fun is enacted. However, we also move through a number of critical definitions of fun as the book progresses, some of them rather charming. For example, we find that Ian Bogost thinks it is ‘the feeling of finding something new in something familiar’, Jesse Schell that ‘fun is pleasure with surprises’ and, rather more cynically, the provocation from Pete Garcin that begins this review declares fun to be too broad a concept to have meaning in games design. Perhaps it is, but the authors certainly intend to enjoy themselves on trying to reach this point.

However, although some of the later chapters relate players and player communities to their aesthetic desires, there is less than might be expected on playfulness – indeed this seems rather absent. Case in point, my visiting mother became extremely aggrieved that the title of the book suggests that fun, taste and games are ‘idle and unproductive’. This may have been because she was mid flow about how she had beaten several friends at a new boardgame over the weekend, or simply that disagreeing with things is most certainly one of her favourite ways of having fun, but despite her annoyances, the playful player does not take up a huge amount of space in this book.

Have we pushed fun away because it is unquantifiable? A key takeaway from this book is that we might also have inadvertently orchestrated a very narrow description of what playfulness can be. The work presented here very much refigures this, and provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing philosophy of Games Studies scholarship.

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