

Schooling games:

A review of Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* by Nick Taylor

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* is an ambitious project – it is at once a conceptual toolkit for practicing game designers and scholars, a curriculum-defining “textbook” for game design and game studies students, and an attempt to establish the “emerging” field of game design as a discipline unto itself, with its own vocabulary and pool of knowledge (3). The book succeeds on several counts: it broadens the range of theoretical perspectives currently dominating digital game studies (beyond merely looking at digital games as “narrative” or simulation), provides clear, functional definitions to such foundational (and contested) terms as “play,” “interactivity,” “game,” and “system,” integrates these definitions into a broad set of theoretical perspectives, subsumes these perspectives in an overarching concern for game design principles, and identifies and articulates commonalities across a wide spectrum of types of games, from teenage kissing games to professional sports to digital gamesⁱ. Where the book fails, however, with implications for both the emerging game design discipline and digital game studies, is in its relative lack of attention to the socio-cultural aspects of game design and play.

From a game design perspective, the book misses an opportunity to hold digital game designers accountable for the persistence of racial and gender stereotypes in their work, and does not address the gender imbalances currently in the digital games industry; from a game theory perspective, the book fails to offer substantial grounding in

ⁱ Though the book covers “all” games, there is a bias towards *digital* games throughout: just under half of the games cited (47%) are digital, the “Additional Readings and Resources” section at the end are almost exclusively digital games-oriented, and many of the chapters – including the three central chapters in the “Play” unit – are concerned almost exclusively with digital games. Given this bias, one may wonder as to the authors' intention in including other forms of games: a possible answer is that they are deliberately playing down the “uniqueness” of digital games, broadening digital game scholars' analytical scope and remedying what Nick Montfort (2003) identifies as the “biggest problem” with digital game studies: “a lack of deep consideration of pre-computer games.”

sociological, cultural, or anthropological theories for analyzing game play, especially compared to the attention given to theories addressing the “formal systems” of games.

Textbook by design

Rules of Play is organized into “schemas,” conceptual perspectives which provide a multivalent understanding of the “fundamental” principles of game design and game play. These schemas borrow from an eclectic range of theories: cybernetics, cognitive psychology, literary theory, and semiotics, among others. Cohesion across these various schemas is brought about through their organization into three broader “Units:” “Rules” (schemas which address the logic, mechanics, and formal systems of games), “Play” (schemas that focus on the (individual’s) experience of playing games, including how games’ formal systems are often transformed through play), and “Culture” (schemas which place game play and design within larger social and cultural contexts).

Establishing a “critical discourse” for game design is a central project of the book. The authors provide four reasons for trying to do so: to provide designers with a shared set of concepts and a shared pool of knowledge; to allow this knowledge to be transferred between generations of designers; to allow games to be analyzed and critiqued in a more informed manner by game players, critics, and designers; and, speaking particularly to digital games, to enable practitioners to defend their games against censorship and sensationalist criticism.

As this enframing of *Rules of Play*’s project implies, the authors have a clear pedagogical aim with the book – to provide what amounts to a *curriculum* for game designers. This pedagogical intent is manifest in the design and structure of the book itself; conceptual perspectives on game design (schemas) are presented as individual chapters, furnished with key words and a closing point-form summaries, and grouped into

“Units.” The authors (who run educational game design workshops at various academic and professional institutions) even provide “Game Design Exercises” for readers (presumably game design teachers and students) to carry out, each matched with its complementary “schema.” The book, quite literally, looks and “acts” like a conventional textbook. Mediating against - possibly “playing” with - this pedantic structure, however, the authors maintain a casual, conversational tone throughout most of the book.

Meaningful play, meaning-less culture?

A key concept to the “critical discourse” the authors put forward – the foundations of which are established through the first “Unit,” entitled “Core Concepts” – is “meaningful play” which, though defined early on in the book (page 34), is revisited in a number of subsequent schemas. “Meaningful play,” according to Salen and Zimmerman, is the primary *goal* of game design, “the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action” (37). A concept which addresses digital game designer Warren Spector’s insistence (as cited by the authors) on the importance of “a vocabulary that allows us [game designers] to examine, with some degree of precision, how games evoke emotional-intellectual responses in players,” “meaningful play” and its repeated invocation throughout the book offers a sustained exploration of the affective relationship between players and games (2).

“Meaningful play” thus acts as a keystone in the authors’ construction of a “critical discourse” for game designers and theorists, and of a game design curriculum as a whole; how successfully and “meaningfully” it is invoked throughout various schemas (and possibly entire Units) might therefore be seen as one measure of the authors’ effectiveness in applying a particular perspective or set of ideas to game design. How “meaningful play” is played out throughout the book’s various schemas, in other words,

can offer grounds for determining which perspectives are well- or under-developed in relation to game design.

To illustrate, the authors invoke the term several times throughout the “Rules” unit, examining for instance how “meaningful play” is enabled through the degree and impact of chance in a particular game (179), how a game’s design should entail a “tight coupling” between player action and game outcome (137), and the relationship between “meaningful play” and the complexity (or lack thereof) of a game’s rules (157). The “Culture” unit (also the shortest of the three primary schemas), by comparison, is relatively devoid of discussion of “meaningful play,” the most obvious exception a brief discussion of *The Sims* players’ creation of “meaningful” narratives using the game’s “Family Album” feature (541-544). This is perhaps partially due to the authors’ definition of “meaningful play” itself; as the authors state, when games are analyzed within their broader socio-cultural contexts, the lines between their artificial “systems” and “real life” become increasingly difficult to define (585), making the book’s mechanistic and individualistic understanding of “meaningful play” less tenable.

This lack of sustained connection between the book’s central concept and the majority of the “Culture” schemas, however, speaks to a larger neglect for socio-cultural considerations in *Rules of Play*, compared to the theoretical breadth of the “Rules” and “Play” schemas. Unlike those found in “Rules” and “Play,” the “Culture” schemas rarely draw from relevant theoretical frameworks, and focus instead on content analyses and comparisons of particular games, or accounts of various “community” practices (such as the above-mentioned communally-shared *Sims* narratives). Though the authors ground these analyses in concepts such as “ideology,” “rhetoric,” and “resistance,” these concepts are presented without the theoretical rigor needed to adequately ground the

schemas in which they arise. That the “Culture” schemas are theoretically underdeveloped has possible (unfortunate) implications for the book’s usefulness to digital game scholars: in failing to provide conceptual rigor to an understanding of “the effects of culture on games, and the effects of games on culture” (104), the authors arguably perpetrate – rather than challenge – digital game studies’ lack of analysis and theorization of the practices of digital gaming communities.

This lack of depth in the “Culture” schemas has implications as well for the book’s goal of serving as a curricular tool for game designers. For example, though “Games as Cultural Rhetoric” addresses problematic representations of gender in digital games (524-526), it does so in cursory fashion, as merely a brief case study in how games relate to “cultural rhetorics” (ideologies). Also, in neglecting the “culture” of game design itself – particularly, the continued gender imbalances in the digital games industry, where only an estimated 17% of workers are female (Haines, 2004) – the authors miss a valuable opportunity to hold game designers accountable to larger socio-cultural issues related to their practice. As a project intended to generate self-reflexivity among game designers, this under-developed consideration of the socio-cultural context in which games are designed and produced is unfortunate.

Class dismissed

Though shallow in its socio-cultural considerations of game play and design, *Rules of Play* is still an impressive “textbook” which establishes a functional vocabulary for both game scholars and game designers, providing an exhaustive reference of game design perspectives for practitioners while broadening the theoretical scope of digital game studies beyond games as either narrative or simulation.

Works cited

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