

Brian Upton. *The Aesthetic of Play*. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press,

2015. ISBN: 9780262028516

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In *The Aesthetic of Play*, veteran videogame designer Brian Upton sets out to create a critical framework through which game designers and academics alike can approach the notion of play. For Upton, “play” is not limited simply to the sphere of video games but, rather, encompasses a host of activities, from board games and sport to make-believe and theatre. Beyond what we generally understand as “playing,” Upton argues, there are elements of play operating below the surface of almost all activities that require interpretation and communication. From this rather broad base, Upton’s study traces a winding path through phenomenology, linguistics, and neuroscience, before concluding with a quick overview of meta-criticism and an explanation of the weaknesses of Derridean deconstruction when viewed through his own framework, all punctuated by hundreds of references to videogames, films, literature, and popular culture.

The problem identified by Upton is a very real one: the rise of videogames as a cultural product and their evolution as an artistic medium has been far too fast and unpredictable for existing critical theory to keep up. In barely a generation, videogames have gone from a relatively niche sub-cultural product to a truly international phenomenon, with some games franchises and publishers growing into cultural (and economic) juggernauts.

The emergence of videogames as a genuine cultural force has—for

obvious reasons—gone hand-in-hand with the technology boom starting in the 1980s. As technology has improved, games have been able to become more complex, more realistic, and much more easily available. And while media studies theorists have been quick to examine and adjust to the rise of new media, and the IT and design sectors have embraced and analysed the technological aspects of the digital revolution, videogames have, to date, more or less slipped through the critical net, generally failing to be considered cultural products on a par with film, music, literature, and the like. As Upton points out in the opening pages of *The Aesthetic of Play*, this is particularly curious when we consider how widespread play really is:

From the pre-Columbian ball courts of Central America, to the board games of the Indian subcontinent, from the rope-skipping games of the Outback, to the pebble-and-pit games of Africa, from the chivalric tournaments of medieval Europe, to videogames in modern Japan—everywhere we look, in every era and every culture, we find games, and humans playing them (9).

Upton approaches this book with a wealth of hands-on experience in the games industry. As a founder of Red Storm Entertainment, he worked as a lead designer on games including the highly-popular *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon*, and he now works with Sony developing scripts for games. In his own words, he is “a game designer . . . not a philosopher, or a neuroscientist, or a professor of English literature” (304). With this in mind, and with the existing critical frameworks of philosophy, neuroscience, and English literature all proving, according to Upton, relatively disinterested in creating a critical space for videogames, it is disappointing that this book spends so much time defining, explaining, criticising, then conditionally absolving philosophy, neuroscience and literary studies for the approaches they offer to games.

Upton’s work is at its strongest when he explains and analyses the structures within videogames that not only draw the player into a game but hold them there. Early in the book, Upton introduces the notion of four key constraints that shape a player’s interaction with a game: the game as designed, the game as encountered, the game as understood, and the conceptual background (33). What soon emerges from his analysis of the basic framework of the gaming experience is how truly unique videogames are as cultural artefacts, given the amount of interactive input each individual player has in shaping their own experience with a game. In a pattern that becomes frustratingly common throughout the book though, Upton barely outlines the issue before moving on, via a series of personal anecdotes, generic examples, and (often dubious) analogies, to another aspect of

“play” in general.

It is this regular slipping between the examination of videogames as a discrete artistic genre and the notion of human play in the broadest possible sense that exposes many of the book’s weakest aspects. In this respect, Upton reaches too far, too often. The seeds of this overreach are sown in *The Aesthetic of Play*’s opening chapters, in which Upton makes clear his desire to craft a theory which, while intended to help illuminate videogames, will also help explain the enduring appeal of everything from chess, to football, to *Hamlet*. After surveying a number of other critics’ definitions of play, Upton settles on: “Play is free movement within a system of constraints” (15). Making full use of this rather fluid definition, Upton goes on to cite everything from games of make-believe he played with his children to the fictional “holodeck” virtual reality system from *Star Trek* as evidence in favour of the critical framework he wants to create.

Rather than offering fleeting references to such a wide range of games and play forms, *The Aesthetic of Play* would have benefitted tremendously by narrowing its scope to either videogames alone or, if it really is “play” rather than videogames at the core of the work, then focusing on a number of specific examples from different forms of play, such as a select handful of videogames, sports, board games and role-playing games. In aiming to develop such a versatile framework, surely its implications for the 67 individual games Upton cites in passing would become clear from a detailed analysis of a much smaller number of contrasting examples.

Such a broad scope of reference inherently limits the depth of each example given, and the limited engagement with these examples in turn leads to a host contradictions and imperfections that ultimately muddy the waters rather than clear up the often sound points Upton is attempting to make.

Take, for example, Upton’s discussion of “directionality” in a game’s phase space. For a turn-based board game like chess, Upton explains—convincingly—how the possible combinations of pieces and positions is essentially triangular, that is, growing from a fixed point at the very start before any moves have been made, to an incredibly wide range of possibilities, with more possible positions able to have been reached with each move. Each move, then, represents one possible combination of the mind-boggling number of positions possible in a chess game. By plotting these points within the hypothetically triangular phase space Upton plots the trajectory of a hypothetical game. In contrast to this, Upton suggests a game of football is best illustrated as a circular phase space with a squiggly line meandering through the phase space, sometimes crossing back over itself to represent the same position recurring. This representation, though, does

not stand up to even moderate interrogation. The phase space of a game of football does, logically, have the same triangular phase space as chess. It is the temporal aspect of chess, represented by the accumulation of “turns,” that defines its triangular trajectory; likewise, the phase space of football, whether it is professional or in a park between friends, is defined by its temporality. No position in a game of chess can be truly repeated because every move can only be made once, even if the pieces do end up in repeated positions (i.e. to have the same pieces in the same position on the fifth move as on the twenty-fifth move is a different point in the phase space thanks to the temporal shift.) Likewise, no position in football can ever be repeated since, at every moment, only one move can be made and that move can never be changed. As such, in addition to the phase space of football being incorrectly conceived, the line of the game’s trajectory is wrong: it can never cross itself because the same position can never be repeated since the same time in the game can never be repeated—nil-all after one minute is not the same position as nil-all after 90 minutes.

Describing a flawed example like this will always sound petty in isolation but, page after page, such flaws have a cumulative effect. The true implications of this are laid bare when Upton turns his attention to neuroscience. Having found myself confronted with so many unclear examples and questionable analogies in areas in which I do feel confident in my own understanding of the subject matter, when Upton looks to neuroscience to support his argument—neuroscience being an area about which I have no knowledge whatsoever—I simply could not have faith in the fidelity of his claims. This was only exacerbated by the striking lack of references throughout the neuroscience section, especially considering Upton himself openly admits he is no neuroscientist.

As an avid gamer, life-long sports fan, and literary critic, I figured I was the ideal demographic for this book and was excited by the prospect of a fresh aesthetic approach to videogames. I was genuinely surprised and disappointed, though, to find myself so regularly frustrated by *The Aesthetic of Play* and to ultimately take so little from it. This is most likely a result of the book aiming to please too many readers: gamers with no understanding of critical theory might benefit from the introduction Upton provides to a number of major critical theories, but the lack of in-depth engagement with specific games as texts ultimately renders it little more helpful for such readers than an internet search for “deconstruction” would prove. In turn, readers coming to the book ready-armed with a basic grasp of critical theory but no knowledge of the many games to which Upton refers will find his frequent references far more confusing than helpful.

Finally, on the issue of bringing new audiences to videogames, one fi-

nal point is worth making. The cultures of both gamers and game designers are often criticised as misogynist—an issue highlighted by the 2014 “Gamergate” incident, in which a number of female games critics were the targets of vile online abuse based on their gender. As generations of both civil rights movements and literary criticism have demonstrated, a “casual” level of discrimination is often at play in our day-to-day communication, manifesting in phenomena such as gendered language and stereotypes. With this in mind then—and when approached in the already highly-charged context of the games industry—a number of Upton’s analogies, such as “[i]magine a little girl playing with dolls in a dollhouse” with her mother (188), feel somewhat incongruous; likewise, his constant references to “the gamer” with the gendered pronoun “he” feel a decade or two late.

Upton is clearly a critic with a wealth of fascinating things to say about videogames. Despite this book’s shortcomings, his overall project is not only admirable but necessary; hopefully his future works take his knowledge and experience into the critical domain where many of his insights—and videogames in general—deserve to be.

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