Handbook of Computer Game Studies

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Description
Review of *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* / Raessens, Joost and Jeffrey Goldstein (eds.)

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Like all massive edited compilation, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* has something for almost everybody interested in its topic area, but much that will not interest any particular reader. The book, for me, is defined by its sheer size. It is in an 8.5 X 11 format, and has 27 articles extending over 450 pages. It is intended to be definitive as of its publication date in 2005. However, due to the inevitable lag in hard copy publication processes, it is probably better thought of as definitive as of 2004. This means, of course, in this very rapidly moving field, that some of the content has been outdated by much more recent publications on the web itself, or in more nimble hard-copy journals.

Given these inevitable shortcomings, however, this is a wonderfully useful book for any serious student (or player) of computer games. It must be said, however, that the tone is very scholarly. These works were not produced for the fun of writing about an activity personally loved by many of the authors, and neither is the reader’s pleasure a high priority for most of them.

Many readers of *Interface* may feel that a deeply scholarly work such as this is not for them. I would argue, however, that such a book is particularly important in this field. Computer gaming is one of the major impacts of the Internet, as important in its own way as is Internet-driven commercial activity or Web-based pornography. Anyone who even glances at CNN or has a computer in the house has some opinion on the attractions and danger of computer gaming.

Scholarly works such as these merit our attention, despite their often-pedantic tone. They show us precisely what we do know—and do not know—about the supposed social impacts of computer gaming. The questions of gaming addiction and possible contribution to violent or other anti-social activities are dealt with repeatedly in this work. It is useful to note that the scholarly jury is still out on these issues. [1] What the authors repeatedly point up is the weaknesses of earlier studies, many of which have been done in the glare of politically driven searches for easy
answers to very complex questions.

The contributors also show us how very difficult it is to study what might seem to be the most easily observable of phenomena: play. But imagine yourself a research subject seated at a computer in a lab—or in one study in a gymnasium—surrounded by scholars all focused on this critical stage of their study, who then tell you to “play and have fun”. Meanwhile, the scholars take notes, whisper among themselves, and draw conclusions from even your transient facial expressions.

If studies like the above did not drive social policy and inform public opinion (once filtered through the crawl bar at CNN or given 45 seconds of sprightly analysis by the news twinkie of the day), then we could leave works such as this to the academic audiences who create them. But we ourselves are deeply affected by the impact of the Internet, and particularly by computer gaming, and we should have a highly informed understanding of it. This work, while not a painless introduction to the field, is a very useful one that can be consulted repeatedly in many different ways; it is, as the title suggests, a “handbook.”

The articles are organized into six categories, each running from three to five articles, as follows:

1. Computer Games
2. Design
3. Reception
4. Games as an Esthetic Phenomenon
5. Games as a Cultural Phenomenon
6. Games as a Social Phenomenon

As these divisions suggest, the articles cover a wide range of topics. Some variance in coverage is inevitable. I found that parts I, II, and III, while provocative and informative, tended often to be similar to materials found elsewhere. However, for a new student of Gaming Studies, they would provide an excellent orientation to the field and to the “classical” or foundational literature of the field.

The variation in topic coverage is somewhat compensated for by generally successful attempts on the part of individual contributors to refer to articles in the work by other participants. The two editors, having the necessity to read all submissions earlier and more often than the other participants, naturally were the most effective at this synthesis. This dialogue builds comprehension.

Where the book was most useful to me, as a sort of tweener student of gaming studies, neither an expert nor a novice, was in the last three sections, Games as Esthetic, Cultural, and Social phenomena. Of these, section VI, Games as a Social Phenomenon, would probably be most relevant to our Bergund Center audience of those interested in the impact of the Internet.
The work also has excellent notes following each article, of use to both general readers and scholars looking for research materials. The index is thorough and also makes the book more valuable than the simple sum of its chapters.

Other useful points in the work which may not be familiar to a lay audience, and most probably not to gamers themselves, deeply immersed in immediate fantasies of their chosen virtual worlds, is the degree to which computer gaming is in fact not all that revolutionary. Many of the same arguments about gaming were raised by radio, film, television, by arcade games such as pinball machines, by each new form of popular entertainment. Gaming strikes us as revolutionary, rather than evolutionary, because of its form less than because of its social impact or content. These authors provide excellent guidance to where we have been in that regard, and work hard at speculating as to where we may be going.

Many of the noted scholars of computer gaming, media studies, or popular culture have contributed to this work, as have a number of less familiar but extremely thoughtful newer scholars. In particular, European scholars who are less often published in English are here as well, perhaps because the co-editors, Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, are from Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

In summary, this work can be regarded as in indispensable guide to gaming studies. One hopes that it will be regularly updated, if perhaps in cheaper and more accessible formats.

References

[1] For a recent example of the loose use of definitions and the failure to evaluate the scholarly literature in this field, see Rob Wright, “Expert: 40 Percent of World of Warcraft Players Addicted” at http://www.twitchguru.com/2006/08/08/world_of_warcraft_players_addicted/.

[2] Surely the MIT Press gave serious consideration to bringing the articles out in at least two titles, one embracing sections I-III and the other IV-VI. If there is to be a paperback version, one hopes that it will come out in two or more volumes. Its current $50.00 price is also a real obstacle to classroom adoptions at all universities but those whose students are inured to taking out additional loans to buying their texts each semester.

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