BOOK REVIEW:
Diane Carr, David Buckingham, Andrew Burn and Gareth Scott (2008):
*Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play.*

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Through a collection of semi-independent articles, the four authors of *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* offer an introduction to the analysis of computer games and computer game culture. As its title indicates, the types of analysis you will find in this book draw primarily on the typical concerns and conceptual models of semiotic and narrative theory. This broadly linguistic or text-oriented approach combines game analysis with analysis of game playing, production practices and fan cultures. The key question running through all the chapters is how the narrative and audiovisual language of computer games interrelates with the structures and mechanisms of a formally articulated game system, including how this duality is reflected in play situations and fan-based cultural production. In keeping with this general motivation, the book narrows its focus to game genres and practices that, according to the authors, “celebrate their relationships to other media forms”. This means mainly role playing games and action-adventure singleplayer games, although the latter are not treated in the same detail as role playing games like Baldur’s Gate and Final Fantasy VII.

This consistent theoretical and empirical emphasis, and the accessible structure and explicit dialogue between the different contributions, means that *Computer Games* appears as a coherent work, not a collection of articles. It aims to be an introductory book, which places more emphasis on the analysis of games and players than on a systematic discussion of competing theoretical approaches and concepts. The analysis is mainly motivated by established and familiar theories in the field. At the same time there are also some original theoretical contributions, in particular on the question of game genre, and on the generic specificity of role playing games. The central heuristic model of system versus representation (or play versus reading) reflects one of the dominant concerns in computer game studies. The question of how narrative, audiovisual and thematic concerns may conflict or integrate with the goals and demands of ‘gameplay’ continues to be a central axis of debate in academic research, in game design discourses and in the gaming community more widely.

The main strength of the book as a whole is its focussed and genre-oriented approach, and the way in which key theories and concepts are being introduced and put to work through substantial analysis. The close attention to the distinctive characteristics of role playing and action adventure, as well as the relatively detailed descriptions of core features of selected games, will be especially useful for students and others who may be less familiar with these types of games. At the same time, much of the analysis also offers new and productive insights, which are drawn from a novel use of theory along with a close attention to particular games and game playing situations. “Space, Navigation and Affect” by Diane Carr and “Playing Roles” by Andrew Burn – both of which have been published elsewhere in earlier versions – are essential reading in the area of genre analysis. With few exceptions, the other chapters also offer analytic description that stimulates further thought, and which is based on a systematic and transparent application of theory. The chapters “Defining Game Genres” and “Games and Narrative” are good introductions to two of the central topics in computer game studies.
The emphasis on narration and textuality makes sense in the analysis of role-playing games, which typically emphasise narrative, stylistic and thematic concerns, and which give a high priority to the integration of narrative and gameplay mechanics. Also, the majority of the chapters are strongly motivated – explicitly or implicitly – by an interest in comparing computer games to cinema and literature, and from this point of view the authors’ choice of perspective is clearly relevant and important, especially in an introductory book of this nature. Their approach also unifies the study of games and the study of play and players under a consistent theoretical framework. Whereas “Reworking the Text: Online Fandom” draws attention to the interpretive and text-producing practices of players, “Social Play and Learning” provides an informative account of how players respond in a collaborative way to the systemic and instrumental imperatives of the action-adventure game.

On the other hand, the conceptual framework of text-versus-system, which unifies the individual studies, is also the main limitation of the book. While some of the chapters do apply this model in broadly conceived and innovative ways – Andrew Burns’ analysis of how the ‘imperative’ and the ‘indicative’ modes work together in Final Fantasy VII is particularly instructive – other chapters use it in a fairly simplified and predictable one-size-fits-all manner. As such the theoretical model does not always contribute very much to the analysis, other than to confirm and cement a commonly established dichotomy. In “Motivation and Online Gaming” and “Agency in and around Play”, which in my opinion are the weaker chapters in the book, theory is applied too crudely to produce anything new or noteworthy. The former also suffers from a general lack of dialogue with existing research and theory on the MMO genre. “Film, Adaptation and Computer Games” and “Games and Gender”, which are otherwise solid articles that offer important insights, also suffer somewhat from being shoehorned into a simple representation-versus-game framework.

My main complaint about Computer Games, then, while acknowledging its many strengths and contributions, is that the ‘conceptual toolkit’ offered is a little too narrow for an introductory book. The strong commitment to “the reading and making of signs” conflicts with the stated aim to bring “a range of concepts and strategies” to the analysis of games and gaming practices. Following what we might loosely call the cybertext-approach to game analysis, the focus in this book is on how play generates, realises or produces text – or how it fails to do so – and on how this signifying activity is governed by the players’ interaction with the game-system in abstract terms. This mapping of text onto systems, of reading onto play, does in some places become a straightjacket, struggling to push beyond the simple conclusion that these two dimensions actually do combine or ‘interweave’ in games. The dichotomy also leaves considerable blind spots. Questions of embodiment and perception, which are particularly important in the action-adventure genre, are largely overlooked. Moreover, the role and status of simulation in computer games is never addressed or considered in any of the chapters, other than as a set of (almost unexpected) interrelations between game rules and audio-visual representation.

However, in spite of its limitations and weaknesses, Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play is an accessible and highly recommended introduction to text-oriented analysis, and a substantial contribution to the field of computer game studies.