

Understanding Video Games

The Essential Introduction

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen,
Jonas Heide Smith,
and Susana Pajares Tosca

Second Edition



UNDERSTANDING VIDEO GAMES

The expanded and revised second edition of *Understanding Video Games* provides a comprehensive introduction to the growing field of game studies.

Understanding Video Games, 2nd Edition is an essential reference for newcomers to video game studies and experienced game scholars alike. This follow-up to the pioneering first edition takes video game studies into the next decade of the twenty-first century, highlighting changes in the game business, advances in video game scholarship, and recent trends in game design and development—including mobile, social, and casual gaming.

In *Understanding Video Games, 2nd Edition* students will:

- Assess the major theories used to analyze games, such as ludology and narratology
- Gain familiarity with the commercial and organizational aspects of the game industry
- Trace the history of video games from *Pong* to PlayStation 3 and beyond
- Explore the aesthetics of game design
- Evaluate the cultural position of video games
- Consider the potential effects of both violent and “serious” games.

Extensively illustrated, and featuring discussion questions, a glossary of key terms, and a detailed video game history timeline (including an interactive online version), *Understanding Video Games, 2nd Edition* is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in examining the ways video games are reshaping entertainment and society.

Please visit the companion website for this book at www.routledge.com/cw/egenfelt-nielsen.

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Second edition published 2013
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Routledge 2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Jonas Heide.

Understanding video games: the essential introduction / by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: Understanding video games / Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, Susana Pajares Tosca. c2008.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Video games. I. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon. II. Tosca, Susana Pajares.

III. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon. Understanding video games. IV. Title.

GV1469.3.E44 2012

794.8—dc23

2011052221

ISBN: 978-0-415-89696-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-89697-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-11677-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Joanna by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
About the Reader/Structure of the Book/The Larger Questions	
1 STUDYING VIDEO GAMES	7
Who Studies Video Games?/How do you Study Video Games?/Types of Analysis/Schools of Thought?	
2 THE GAME INDUSTRY	15
The Size of the Game Industry/The Structure of the Game Industry/The Development Process/Roles in Game Development	
3 WHAT IS A GAME?	27
General Models for Understanding Games/The Issue of Genre	
4 HISTORY	53
A Brief Pre-history of Video Games/Does History Matter?/A History of Video Games/The 1970s/The 1980s/The 1990s/The 2000s/The 2010s and Beyond/Perspectives	
5 VIDEO GAME AESTHETICS	117
Rules/Geography and Representation/Number of Players/Games without Boundaries	
6 VIDEO GAMES IN CULTURE	157
The Cultural Position of Video Games/Players	
7 NARRATIVE	193
Storytelling/Reception—The Player’s Experience of a Story/A Brief History of Literary Theory and Video Games	
8 SERIOUS GAMES—WHEN ENTERTAINMENT IS NOT ENOUGH	229
Traditional Games for Serious Purposes/Categorizing Educational Computer Games/The Rationale Behind Edutainment/The Instructional Approach to Edutainment/The Modern Approach to the Educational Use of Computer Games/The Educational Effectiveness of Video Games/Political Games and Newsgames/Advertainment/Gamification—Plug’n’Play Games for Real?/Games-for-change—Revolutionaries Rise/Final Remarks	
9 VIDEO GAMES AND RISKS	255
Two Research Perspectives/The Active Media Perspective/The Active User Perspective/Other Questions/Final Remarks	
Video Game Timeline	281

Glossary	285
Games Cited	289
Bibliography	295
Index	315

Illustrations

Figures

2.1	Annual global sales of filmed entertainment, video games and music	16
2.2	Annual global game revenues by platform	17
2.3	Annual global game revenues by region	17
2.4	Major game industry institutions	20
3.1	<i>Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood</i>	27
3.2	Game A shares features with Game B, which shares features with Game C. Game A and Game C share no features	28
3.3	Cailliois's classification of games	32
3.4	Jesper Juul's model of how standard game definitions work	41
3.5	<i>Lemmings</i>	41
3.6	<i>Little Computer People</i>	42
3.7	<i>Super Mario Bros.</i>	44
3.8	<i>FIFA 2012</i> (iPhone version)	47
3.9	<i>Championship Manager 4</i>	48
4.1	<i>Spacewar!</i>	59
4.2	<i>Pong</i>	61
4.3	<i>Night Driver</i>	62
4.4	<i>Space Invaders</i>	63
4.5	<i>Asteroids</i>	64
4.6	<i>Mystery House</i>	66
4.7	<i>E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial</i>	67
4.8	<i>Battlezone</i>	68
4.9	<i>Defender</i>	69
4.10	<i>Pac-Man</i>	70
4.11	<i>Space Panic</i>	71
4.12	<i>Gauntlet</i> (Commodore 64 version)	72
4.13	<i>Moon Patrol</i>	73
4.14	<i>Summer Games II</i> (Commodore 64)	74
4.15	<i>Zaxxon</i>	74
4.16	<i>Double Dragon</i>	75
4.17	<i>Balance of Power</i> (1990 version)	76
4.18	<i>Nuclear War</i> (DOS)	77
4.19	<i>Herzog Zwei</i>	78
4.20	<i>King's Quest I: Quest for the Crown</i> (2004 remake by Anonymous Game Developers Interactive)	80
4.21	<i>Maniac Mansion</i> (2004 remake by LucasFan Games)	81
4.22	<i>Bard's Tale I</i> (Commodore 64 version)	82
4.23	<i>Microsoft Flight Simulator</i> (1986 MAC version)	83
4.24	<i>Elite</i> (DOS version)	84
4.25	<i>Sid Meier's Pirates!</i> (2004 PC remake)	85
4.26	<i>SimCity</i> (DOS)	86
4.27	<i>Wolfenstein 3D</i>	88
4.28	<i>Doom</i>	89
4.29	<i>Tomb Raider II: The Dagger of Xian</i>	90
4.30	<i>Mortal Kombat</i> (DOS version)	91

4.31	<i>The Secret of Monkey Island</i> (DOS)	92
4.32	<i>Myst</i> (2000 remake)	93
4.33	<i>Baldur's Gate II</i>	94
4.34	<i>Dune II</i>	95
4.35	<i>Sid Meier's Civilization</i>	95
4.36	<i>Halo</i> (PC version)	99
4.37	<i>Super Monkey Ball</i>	100
4.38	<i>Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City</i> (PC)	101
4.39	<i>Guitar Hero</i> (iPhone version)	102
4.40	<i>Canabalt</i>	103
4.41	<i>Syberia</i>	104
4.42	<i>Black and White</i>	105
4.43	<i>Desktop Tower Defense</i>	106
4.44	<i>iShoot</i>	107
4.45	Subscriptions to the largest MMOGs (late 2011)	108
4.46	<i>World of Warcraft</i>	109
4.47	<i>Limbo</i>	110
4.48	<i>Angry Birds</i>	112
5.1	<i>Star Craft 2: Wings of Liberty</i>	122
5.2	Rock-paper-scissors	123
5.3	Relationship of <i>Age of Empires II: Age of Kings</i> units	123
5.4	Two-dimensional graphics mean that the game action is limited to a simple coordinate system	125
5.5	<i>Bomb Jack</i>	126
5.6	Basic graphical/spatial game characteristics	126
5.7	<i>Pac-Man 3D</i> : first-person perspective version of a traditionally third-person perspective game	127
5.8	<i>Doom</i> : first-person perspective	128
5.9	<i>Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn</i>	129
5.10	Example of the isometric perspective	130
5.11	<i>SimCity 2000</i>	130
5.12	In games with three-dimensional graphics, the gamespace can be thought of as the inside of a box	131
5.13	3D model	132
5.14	<i>Tomb Raider</i>	132
5.15	<i>Freespace II</i>	133
5.16	A torus	134
5.17	<i>Super Monkey Ball</i> : player-controlled monkeys inside balls traverse obstacle-filled levels	135
5.18	<i>Bruce Lee</i>	136
5.19	<i>Time Pilot</i>	136
5.20	<i>Spy Hunter</i>	137
5.21	<i>Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War</i>	138
5.22	Horizontal scroll	139
5.23	<i>Rainbow Islands</i> (Amiga version)	140
5.24	<i>Doodle Jump</i>	143
5.25	<i>Tetris</i>	144
5.26	<i>Loom</i>	149
5.27	<i>Far Cry</i> (2004). Enemy soldiers adapt (somewhat) to player choices	151
6.1	April Ryan in <i>The Longest Journey</i> , on the way to her next destination	160

6.2	<i>Glitch</i> . A mainstream multiplayer casual game	166
6.3	Positive in-game emotions: a successful Tauren warrior moving on to the next quest in <i>World of Warcraft</i>	170
6.4	Instrumental and expressive productivity	181
6.5	<i>Gizmopolitan</i> , a fictitious magazine: productive players of <i>World of Warcraft</i>	183
7.1	<i>Blade Runner</i> : Howie Lee's bar and our character	194
7.2	<i>Star Wars Racer</i>	195
7.3	The world of <i>Lord of the Rings Online</i>	197
7.4	<i>Myth's</i> gamespace	200
7.5	The gamespace of <i>Everquest</i>	201
7.6	<i>New Zealand Story</i> : the evil walrus kidnaps the kiwi family, but one bird escapes . . .	201
7.7	<i>Max Payne II</i>	202
7.8	A model of classical, linear fiction	205
7.9	A model of interactive fiction	206
7.10	The "saint puzzle" in <i>Dracula: Origin</i>	207
7.11	The cover of the European version of <i>Resident Evil Code: Veronica X</i> for Playstation	210
7.12	<i>Myst</i>	218
7.13	<i>Façade</i>	221
Tables		
1.1	The five major types of analysis and their characteristics	10
2.1	Lifetime sales of major consoles	18
3.1	The characteristics of the four genres	50
9.1	Differences between the Active Media perspective and the Active User perspective	258

Acknowledgments

Knowingly or not, a number of people have helped us write this book, through discussion, comments or by contagious inspiration. For letting us pick their brains, we are indebted to our ex-colleagues at the Center for Computer Games Research: Espen Aarseth, Troels Folmann, Gonzalo Frasca, Jesper Juul, Anker Helm Jørgensen, Lisbeth Klastrup, Sara Mosberg, Miguel Sicart, and T.L. Taylor. For fast and knowledgeable assistance, we owe thanks to the scholarly subscribers of the Games Network discussion list and to Morten Skovgaard, Thomas Vigild, and Mariann Nederby Madsen.

For encouragement, patience, and love we thank Sidsel Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Marie Louise Bossow Smith, and Martin Selmer.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE READER/STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK/THE LARGER QUESTIONS

Some years ago, we began the first edition of this book by noting that the world was changing. From the perspective of video games, that may have been a bit mild. In fact, when looking back, 2007 now seems an almost quaint time of comforting stability.

Broadly speaking, at that time, commercially ambitious games were multimillion-dollar efforts of Himalayan proportions sold in boxes (or through \$11-per-month subscriptions) and the then-current generation of **consoles** seemed merely the most recent chapter of a never-ending battle between console manufacturers.

By the time you launched your first angry bird from a creaking slingshot in 2010 or 2011 to exact revenge on unscrupulous, if immobile, green pigs, things looked quite different. Apple's iPhone had (unpredicted by almost everybody) shown itself to be the device which would unlock the potential of mobile games, just as Facebook and other social networks were suddenly becoming heavyweight gaming platforms in their own right. Meanwhile, it was becoming less clear whether the newest generation of consoles would be the latest—or the last. The computing power of television sets has grown and services that promise to do all the heavy computer lifting and simply stream gaming audiovisuals to you have popped up. The future of the gaming world seems more open now than it did even five years ago.

Of course, in the much larger cultural scheme of things, ours is a time of impressively sudden, varied, and deep shifts. And our age is one in which technology is often the bellwether of these cultural transitions. From miniscule microchips spring visions of the world that challenge, enthrall, and delight us, intensifying our sense of an ever-expanding world.

At some time in the not-so-distant past, most people were content with being passively entertained. More than happy to comply, writers for the page, for the stage, and for the screen would spin linear yarns of great, and sometimes not-so-great, sophistication; makeup would be applied, locations would be scouted, music would be composed, all to grip the heart and captivate our minds. Today, many are not satisfied with their couch-bound spectator status; today, many insist on a more active role.

The remarkable world of digital entertainment we know today all started with a whistling white torpedo sent floating through empty space in an MIT basement in 1961. As the torpedo crashed dramatically into the enemy spacecraft, no horns sounded and no drums shook the ground. This was the first volley in what would be known as *Spacewar!* But beyond the basement, the human race at large paid no notice to the fact that video games had been born.

The conception and subsequent birth were not entirely immaculate. *Spacewar!* was, in fact, shamelessly derivative. Its creators, devoted fans of contemporary

science-fiction books, had large-scale visions of converting their passion to the big screen, and *Spacewar!* is reminiscent of many space battle movies. More importantly, *Spacewar!* merely marked the opening line of a new chapter in the larger, millennia-spanning history of games.

Creating and playing games is a basic impulse of *Homo sapiens*. The ancient Greeks, the Vikings, and most likely even our ancient cave-dwelling ancestors had rule-based systems of **play**. These served many purposes, from entertainment to competition to education. But our new, post-*Spacewar!* chapter is remarkable. In the historical blink of an eye, video games have colonized our minds and invaded our screens. From a Boston basement, video games have exploded exponentially—reproducing at an alarming rate, much like the fearful space invaders that inspired so many early games—until they are now everywhere, from tiny mobile phone displays to ostentatious wall-mounted plasma TVs. And although games like the anti-terrorist, multiplayer *Counter-Strike* or the role-playing space epic *Mass Effect 3* are indebted to ancient predecessors, games are not what they used to be either. As the computer has offered up its sublime powers—capable of the impartial processing of even the most complex of rules and the simultaneous, dynamic presentation of sound and graphics—new game forms seem more akin to living, breathing worlds than to backgammon or poker.

It was inevitable that academics would eventually notice. Thus, for the last ten years, scholars have unleashed traditional theories and methods of analysis—sometimes effortlessly, sometimes more awkwardly—onto the phenomenon of video games. New theories have even evolved, coinciding with a growing number of books and websites devoted to the medium, and with the ever-growing demand for game design professionals. Since the twin fields of game studies and (video) game design are still in the early phases of construction, and since scholars approach games from widely different paradigms, much of the knowledge is not yet easily mapped—or even findable. Hence the need for this book.

In the following chapters, we aim to provide the reader with a broad understanding of video games and video game studies. We explore what we consider to be the most important developments and the most influential perspectives and discuss the relations between them. We have been greatly helped by the superb enthusiasm with which experienced gamers have begun to document and chronicle the history of the game industry and of the games themselves. This deeply felt devotion to the medium has manifested itself in the publication of impressive books such as J.C. Herz's *Joystick Nation* (1997), Van Burnham's *Supercade* (2001), Liz Faber's *re:play* (1998), and Rusel DeMaria's and Johnny L. Wilson *High Score!* (2002). Comprehensive and extremely useful game documentation projects—like *The International Arcade Museum* (www.arcade-museum.com) and *MobyGames* (www.mobygames.com)—also serve as crucial information depots for the game scholar.

Such resources nicely complement the publication of thorough and knowledgeable volumes on game design, history and theory, such as Chris Crawford's now-classic *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1982), Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997), Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Richard Rouse's *Game Design: Theory and Practice* (2001), Richard Bartle's *Designing Virtual Worlds* (2003), Andrew Rollings and Dave Morris's *Game Architecture and Design* (2000), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* (2004), Jesper Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (2007), and Tristan Donovan's *Replay* (2010).

Understanding Video Games owes its existence to these predecessors. But, needless to say, everything there is to know about games cannot fit snugly into one volume. Even many volumes would be incapable of documenting the astounding growth of

the games field. Instead, we refer liberally to original literature and to more comprehensive treatments of many of the issues that we touch upon.

ABOUT THE READER

We have written this book to serve a variety of purposes. Our primary audience is a student of games, perhaps in a program of study anchored within the humanities or the social sciences. He or she is not yet a fully trained games scholar, but has an interest in achieving a broad understanding of games. But the comprehensive overview we are striving for should find other beneficiaries as well. Those who are technically oriented or mainly interested in designing games will hopefully find much here to interest them, even if the book does not directly increase their practical skills. Similarly, one of our core assumptions is that any student of games will benefit from at least a passing knowledge of issues not specifically tied to his or her specialty. Understanding how games work and why they look the way they do requires an interdisciplinary approach. We should all, in a perfect world, be equally unafraid of code, aesthetic theory, and social thinking. Finally, we hope that even professional scholars will find useful our attempt to map systematically the pertinent topics in game studies.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Beyond this introduction and [Chapter 1](#), the book is divided into the following chapters:

[Chapter 2: *The Game Industry*](#) Explores the business side of video games, to provide a basis for understanding large-scale trends in contemporary game design.

[Chapter 3: *What Is a Game?*](#) Introduces the reader to classic and current approaches to the study of games and play, and discusses how to group games meaningfully into specific types or **genres**.

[Chapter 4: *History*](#) Tells the history of video games, focusing on the development of game form and groundbreaking titles. This history emphasizes the games themselves, rather than the game industry or individual designers.

[Chapter 5: *Video Game Aesthetics*](#) Offers a formal description of games in terms of sound, graphics, and use of space and time.

[Chapter 6: *Video Games in Culture*](#) Positions video games in our modern (media) culture and examines the discourses that both surround and permeate the gaming world. It also explores some of the cultural practices of video game players: who they are, why they play games, and how they organize themselves in communities that generate culture inside and outside their games.

[Chapter 7: *Narrative*](#) Recounts the relationship between video games and the art of storytelling, focusing on the role of literary theory in the study of games.

[Chapter 8: *Serious Games—When Entertainment Is Not Enough*](#) Introduces the reader to an increasingly important field often referred to as **serious games**, and discusses topics like “games and learning,” “persuasive games,” and “political games.”

Chapter 9: Video Games and Risks Discusses the oft-mentioned and culturally divisive question of whether (or how) playing certain types of games can harm the player.

Discussion questions appear at the end of each chapter. These are designed to stimulate thought and argument on the topics covered, and to offer avenues for further reading and research.

THE LARGER QUESTIONS

Many people believe that textbooks should be all-inclusive collections of knowledge on a given topic. This is not an unreasonable ambition, but can give a false impression of orderliness, and can ignore the messy, on-the-ground chaos vital to creative and intellectual advances. Such a perspective implies that most issues within a field are settled and that the scholars all agree; the extent of disagreement within a discipline is ignored. Game studies is a young field. It is a field that has yet to settle, systematically and convincingly, some rather important questions.

One of these is the most basic question of all: “What is a game?” Game scholars do not agree on this most fundamental issue. If this worries you, take heart—it is a condition common to many fields. Sociologists, for instance, do not all hold identical ideas about what “society” means; media scholars differ in their definition of “medium.” In one important sense, of course, the question of what comprises a game is really just a question of definition. We cannot determine empirically or logically what a game is. What we can do, however, is seek a definition appropriate for our questions, and be quite explicit about the meaning of “game” when we employ it in important situations.

Another question central to game studies is this: “Why are there games?” Why do we, biological entities capable of creating poetry, climbing mountains, and splitting the atom, spend so much time playing games—especially when playing these games often conflicts with our basic human needs: to sleep, to feed ourselves, to communicate with our spouses? We don’t know. Or rather, the question has sparked surprisingly little interest and no consensus exists. However, some answers have been proposed¹ and, not unreasonably, they tend to be rooted in biology. They usually go something like this: the ability to play allows organisms to simulate real-life situations. Through these simulations, the organism can practice important skills in relative safety. The individual with a disposition towards play then has an adaptive advantage over those lacking this disposition; natural selection takes care of the rest. The individual who practices throwing his spear in his spare time stands a better chance of survival when a saber-toothed tiger attacks. Such an answer, though sensible, is not comprehensive. While evolutionary biology, for instance, may explain why there are games, it does not explain very clearly why our games look the way they do. Nor does it explain why people like different games and display such an enormous range of attitudes about the very act of playing games.

Which leads us to the next question: “Why do some people prefer certain games?” Again, we must admit that we cannot answer this with any sort of conviction. In fact, trustworthy statistics documenting such preferences (or documenting whether there is, in fact, variation) are less than abundant.² We could speculate that age, gender, social status, religion, or hair color correlates with game preferences, but we would then have to explain why this should be the case. We have lots of ideas, but no fully formed theory here. The expanded version of this question is also interesting: do certain types of games appeal to people in certain times or cultures,

and, if so, why? Again, we could speculate that there is a correlation between the rise of capitalism and the popularity of certain types of highly competitive games, but what we really need is a coherent theory of why such a relationship should be expected and rigorous testing of specific hypotheses derived from such a theory.

Lastly, there is the question uttered by everyone from pundits to parents: “How do games affect the player?” In this case there is research but little agreement. The question should not be confused with “Do games affect the player?”—they do. The former question is completely legitimate, but it is also quite difficult to answer (as we shall see in [Chapter 9](#)). Some popular variations on this question include: “Do violent games make players violent?” “Do zero-sum games make people less cooperative in real life?” “Can games teach children useful skills?”

These larger themes are woven throughout *Understanding Video Games*, and we attempt to answer some of the questions by synthesizing the work that has been done so far in game studies. But the reader should keep in mind the relative youth of the field. At present, video game studies may have more questions than answers, more doubts than certainties. The rules are still being formed; the orthodoxies have not yet been established. And for the curious researcher, there are many worlds in need of exploration. Of course, this is part of why the field is so thrilling. In other words, the discipline welcomes you; there is much to be done.

NOTES

¹ Film scholar Joseph Anderson, in the 1996 book *The Reality of Illusion*, has argued interestingly that play behavior is a biological adaptation. This also explains why we like movies.

² One source is Kafai, 1998.

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