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Michael Nitsche (2008, pp.1-2) opens *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* with a call “for a diversity of analytical approaches: no one approach is sufficient, but many offer different yet interconnected perspectives. The more this analytical spectrum grows in width and depth, the richer our picture of the video game becomes.” The appeal to diversity in game research is not a new one. In an article promoting methodological diversity, Dmitri Williams (2005) observed that game scholars tended to demarcate themselves by the preexistent division between the humanities and the social sciences, with one favoring qualitative research methods, the other quantitative. Williams (2005, p.458) proposed communications theory as a bridge between these two camps, urging scholars to blend research methods. “The strengths and weaknesses of any one approach,” he wrote, “are usually complemented and smoothed out by combining it with others.” What does *Video Game Spaces* have to contribute to our understanding of video games, and how well does it do what it preaches and blend research methods?

Make no mistake about it: *Video Game Spaces* is a theory-building exercise deeply indebted to formalist approaches to video games. As its title indicates, the book is an ambitious attempt to construct a theory of space in video games—specifically the space of the navigable third dimension—from the ground up. The book is divided into three sections—“Structure,” “Presentation,” and “Functionality”—which draw from narratology, film studies, and architecture, respectively. This three-part arrangement gives *Video Game Spaces* a distinctly interdisciplinary feel, and it allows Nitsche to approach the same issue, space in games, from different angles. In fact, this substantive interdisciplinarity is one of the book’s selling points, as it allows Nitsche to bring together otherwise disparate or opposed camps in game studies, such as narratologists and ludologists. Nitsche unabashedly borrows conceptual models from different camps and disciplines and proposes his own amalgams. This borrowing of theories is essential to his project, which takes its cues from the Russian formalists, as Nitsche attempts to create a typology of space in video games.

Nitsche frames his discussion of space in video games within his model of the five planes: rule-based (the mathematical rule set), mediated (the game’s presentation on screen), fictional (the player’s imagination), play (player-game interaction), and social (player-player interaction). This analytical framework allows him to construct various models for how these planes operate individually and together to create a player-driven gaming experience. Nitsche’s discussion of the mediated plane is particularly compelling, as he uses the concept of cinematic space and virtual cameras to show how the presentation of the game on screen relates to the other planes. Nitsche uses the five planes effectively to foreground the player’s relationship with the game and present a more complete picture of the entire gaming experience.

Similarly, his focus on space allows him to foreground the designer-player relationship and how players navigate 3D game space. Nitsche conceives of video games as sign systems that are constructed or designed in three-dimensional space. “Game spaces,” Nitsche (2008, p.3) writes, “are approached not as foregrounded spectacles based on visual cues such as perspective and parallax but as presented spaces that are assigned an architectural quality.” This approach to game spaces is unique and fertile, as it allows for both traditional humanities-based research into textual practices and learning environments and more design-based inquiries into visual design and spatial structures.

Methodologically, though, *Video Game Spaces* fits more squarely into the humanities, as it is purely theoretical in nature. Nitsche is rigorous in his theory-building, defining terms, mapping concepts, and developing analytical frameworks with careful, studied precision. That carefulness and comprehensiveness is the book’s greatest strength: you will likely find yourself frequently nodding along as Nitsche constructs his theory with breadth and surprising depth. It may seem trite to say so, but it is also the book’s greatest weakness: at times, the purely theoretical nature of the project is crippling. For all his interdisciplinarity, Nitsche rarely strays from the purely theoretical, and only then to provide personal anecdotes, specific examples (for textual analysis), or historical context, all of which fit squarely into the model of theory-building that occurs in humanities game studies.

Nitsche never utilizes quantitative research methods or even qualitative or ethnographic methods from the social sciences that are becoming more common in humanities game scholarship. These alternate research methods would undoubtedly make the book “richer [in its] picture of the video game.” Not only that, but methodological diversity would make the book more *readable*, a not entirely trivial complaint, given the crossover potential of *Video Game Spaces* to speak to game designers, engineers, and even everyday players (not to mention social scientists, legislators, and parents). The book would have to make sacrifices to bring more research methods into the fold, but those sacrifices would almost certainly make it a better book. It may seem unnecessarily harsh to criticize a book for what it does not do, but in this case, that criticism has merit. In constructing a *theory* of space in video games, *Video Game Spaces* succeeds; in truly *accounting* for space in games, though, it falls short.

That said, having read *Video Game Spaces*, I will never look at three-dimensional game spaces the same way again. Nitsche superbly connects his arguments about game spaces to narratology, film studies, and architecture and design, to the extent that it becomes impossible to divorce world design from narrative from presentation from camera angles from navigation from play. For example, Nitsche (2008, p.42, p.43) defines narrative as part of “the situatedness of the player”: “narrative as comprehension that helps to make sense of actions.” In this sense, narrative becomes more than just linearity (in fact, Nitsche argues that narrative is often non-linear in video games): it becomes part of the entire gaming experience, including how players interact with objects in the game world and how those objects and the game world are presented to players. That concept of narrative alone—Nitsche effectively borrows Henry Jenkins’s argument of game design as “narrative architecture”—is enough to make this book a worthwhile read. That is just one of

many complex and lucid moments throughout the text pushes it from worthwhile to a must-read for any scholar of video games or virtual worlds.

References

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