

The Game Design Reader

A Rules of Play Anthology

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

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Preface

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman



Our primary problem is that we have little theory on which to base our efforts. We don't really know what a game is, or why people play games, or what makes a game great... We need to establish our principles of aesthetics, a framework for criticism, and a model for development... We computer game designers must put our shoulders together so that our successors may stand on top of them.

—Chris Crawford

Radicals and Refugees

In 1982, game designer Chris Crawford threw down the gauntlet in one of the first books written on the design of digital games, *The Art of Computer Game Design*. The questions he asked then still ring true today. Do we know what games are, why people play them, or what makes a game great? Perhaps not, but we're getting closer. Twenty-three years later, we've picked up the gauntlet. For today, we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Giants of play theory like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Bernard DeKoven, and Brian Sutton-Smith. Gurus of game design such as Richard Garfield, Raph Koster, Marc LeBlanc, and Warren Robinett. Pioneering writers and philosophers like David Sudnow, William Poundstone, Bernard Suits, Stephen Sniderman.

Chris Crawford saw the future, took note of it, and stood waiting for others to join him. One by one, these writers, thinkers, players, and designers arrived, from expected and unexpected places. *Game Design: Theory and Practice*; *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*; *Shoot Club*. They came: pioneers, radicals, and malcontents in their own fields, writing into a tradition that didn't yet exist, struggling to find the words for concepts that no one knew yet how to convey. They came, stood, and waited—often alone.

They wrote in zines, blogs, journals, and books, taking games and play, design and technology, players and culture as the subjects of their impassioned study. And while these essays were read, photocopied, downloaded, and passed hand to hand among an increasingly hungry community of readers, a sense of the collective whole remained elusive. Writers and readers shared joint status as videogame refugees, waiting to discover a place they could call home.

The road has been long and a little bit bumpy—like all new paths through an untamed wilderness. But today the refugees have joined rank, and stand shoulder to shoulder before you, bound together in the 33 texts that make up *The Game Design Reader*. This book is, above all else, a historical document of an emerging set of disciplines, an ensemble of unique responses generated by those who love games and all that is made possible through play.

The Reader is also a response to our own status as refugee game designers, teachers, players, and industry advocates. For years, we dreamed about a book that would collect the best writing on games into a single volume. Something to make our students rant and rave, something we could beg game publishers to read, a book to pass around at late-night game conference hotel rooms, a book to show to our skeptical non-gamer friends who doubted games were worthy of such loving attention.

This book *is* that book. We feel privileged to make available the work of fellow game designers struggling against the commercial constraints of the game industry and academics risking tenure to fuel their passion for games. We are inspired by provocative game journalists bucking tired commercial formats, and humbled by historical figures refining their fascination with play. *The Reader* is their book, their testament to what is possible when people get serious about games. This book is something we are truly proud of, because of who and what it contains, and for what it may mean to the future of games.

More than One Way to Play

Don't call us unambitious. *The Game Design Reader*, as well as its textbook predecessor, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, takes on a truly challenging set of questions. What are games and how do they function? How do they interact with culture at large? What critical approaches can game designers take to create meaningful experiences for players? Our audience includes students, game developers, game scholars, game critics, fans, and players.

This is not a book about how to make games, or how to study them from the point of view of one particular field. Instead, it is a collection of perspectives that can be put to use in many different ways. How you use this book is entirely dependent on why you are interested in games in the first place. More than a themed set of texts, *The Game Design Reader* is a snapshot of evolving thinking about games as a subject of study and design. It is a living history of what it means to play a game. Not surprisingly, the wide diversity of its writers mirrors that of its intended readers, and testifies to the vast number of ways that games can be studied.

What's the best way to understand a game? From a formal perspective, we could study probability and logic, systems theory and cybernetics. We could refine our sensibilities in art and design, and explore the aesthetics of sound and space. We could invite sociologists and psychologists, instructional technologists and educators to weigh in. We could include media theorists and semioticians, marketers and entrepreneurs—just to name a few. That's to say nothing of game design, game programming, and other fields that contribute to the actual creation of games. In fact, if you wanted to study everything that might relate in some direct or indirect way to games and play, you could easily spend many lifetimes reading.

There is, obviously, no single approach that covers all of these fields. Add the fact that computer and electronic games are relatively new, critical writings about them even newer, and the vast scope of the problem becomes clear. To say that putting together an anthology of writings like this one is an enormous undertaking is something of an understatement.

So what is one to do in the face of such a daunting task? We planned and improvised, pulling in pieces from every quarter. We deferred to history by drawing from an existing landscape of writing we felt to be essential reading. We polled friends and colleagues incessantly about the best game writing in a variety of fields. We researched and ransacked conference proceedings, journals, syllabi, blogs, and bibliographies (including our own). We looked for the obvious and hidden spaces where writing on games and play was taking place. And somehow, through this frenetic dance of discovery, the structure and content of this book emerged.

Writing Game Writing

Good writing—important writing—on games does exist. More writing than you might think. But a book only has so many pages. Our aim in gathering this collection of texts was not to fulfill the impossible quest of including exhaustive examples from every possible discipline connected to games. Instead, we sought out what we thought to be the most broadly useful types of game writing, and drilled down to find a range of perspectives in each.

Within games journalism, for example, we discovered examples of early and innovative game writing, like those contributed by William Poundstone and David Sudnow. We also included samples of "New Games Journalism," by game-native writers like Tom Chick and Ian Shanahan. Each of these authors pioneered a mode of writing about games we felt was important to include.

We also identified other strong sets of voices within player culture, academia, and game development. What will become immediately apparent in reading the essays included in the collection are the radical differences in approach taken by each. From tone to language to subject matter, the concerns of each are quite distinct. As a taste of the book to come, the following examples demonstrate the range of writing included.

Game journalist:

“Third-person allows you to fully appreciate the acrobatics of the sabre fighting animations. You can swing away in one of three ‘styles,’ fast, medium, and heavy, all of which allow you to wrestle mouse movement and direction key presses to produce jaw-dropping combinations of slashes, chops, and stabs that risks you forgetting any question of your actual opponent as you stare in disbelief and whisper ‘Did I just do that?’.”—always_black on Jedi Knights II

Card game designer:

“Sometimes seemingly innocuous cards would combine into something truly frightening. A good part of playtest effort was devoted to routing out the cards that contributed to so-called ‘degenerate’ decks—the narrow, powerful decks that are difficult to beat and often boring to play with or against.”—Richard Garfield on Magic: The Gathering

Computer game developer:

“The goal of this group was to create a complete document that detailed all the levels and described major monster interactions, special effects, plot devices, and design standards. ...As daunting as that sounds, this is exactly what we did.”—Ken Birdwell on Half-Life

Sociologist:

“Slippages of awareness indicate the fragility of the role-playing enterprise—it can easily be subverted. I emphasize, however, that although this subversion damages the nature of the role-playing, it does not destroy the game.”—Gary Alan Fine on Empire of the Petal Throne

Player:

*“I’ll let you in on a secret: swords SUCK. Yes, it’s true! Although the swords *LOOK* like they have better stats than the blunt weapons, don’t be misled. Most creatures in this game take more damage from blunt weapons than slashing or piercing.”—Mochan on Summoner*

Selecting the Texts

In the face of so much good writing, how did we choose what to include? As our search began to unearth textual treasures, we established five primary criteria to guide the selection process.

Seminal

Each essay should be a “classic” text, representing the first of its kind (initiating a new approach, form of writing, method, or way of thinking) and having an impact on the analysis or practice of games. Each should be broadly acknowledged as a basic core text for anyone studying games.

Teachable

Every essay should raise enough issues to act as a springboard for an important discussion, a class assignment, or a design project. Each should stand on its own, without needing expert knowledge or surrounding chapters to make sense. *The Game Design Reader* is, among other things, an educational reader and we needed to imagine each text being used in a classroom seminar, industry workshop, or other instructional context.

Significant

In addition to being “classic” and teachable, texts should introduce key issues and approaches, summarize a set of methods, or question dominant attitudes and assumptions. Furthermore, every contribution should concentrate squarely on games. We were tempted by texts that looked at interactive narrative, complex systems, software development, or other parallel fields—but we included only those having games as their explicit focus.

Relevant

With so broad an audience, the book’s essays should have relevance and value to a variety of readers. They should address both game designers and game scholars, and be of concern to readers on both sides of the “theory/practice” divide—or for those (like us) who are caught in the middle. Thus we avoided essays that were theoretically tied to a narrow academic field, as well as essays that were primarily concerned with solving practical game development problems.

Diverse

Lastly, each essay should be distinct from the others, staking out a unique territory

of ideas. We sought diversity on many levels. Our search extended to a range of disciplines and authors, garnering a rich texture of writing styles.

While these five criteria guided us, we did leave ourselves some wiggle room. For example, a text might be somewhat obscure (and therefore not “seminal”), but if it succeeded in strongly fulfilling most or all of the other criteria, we included it. Some criteria we managed to meet nearly all of the time: for example, we think all of the texts are highly teachable.

But others were not so well met. Most obviously, we had trouble putting together a collection of truly diverse authors. The writers we ended up including are mostly American, and overwhelmingly male. This was in part because of translation issues for non-English writing, but also because the game industry, and even game-related academia, is not yet represented by a truly diverse set of voices. There are many more women writing on games today than there were fifty—or even five—years ago, and it is our belief that their work will soon make its way into future editions of anthologies such as this one.

It should also be noted that we were not always able to get permission to publish the works we had hoped to include. This is of course a challenge and frustration in any anthology of this scale.

In the end, while these selection criteria helped us make some hard decisions about what to include and what to leave out, the process was still highly subjective. When in doubt, we returned to our own goal of making a collection that was useful to a wide audience interested in games, a collection that we ourselves would enjoy reading, and one that would do its best to mark this unique moment in the history of writing on games.

One Book, Many Topics

The process of selecting essays and putting them together led to the book you are now holding in your hands. But this process was merely preliminary to something more important: determining how the collection would be used by you, our readers. How would you discover which texts are most relevant to your interests? Would it be easy to find themes running through the essays or to see connections between ideas? These questions are important to anyone developing game design curriculums, working through research agendas in game studies programs, or simply looking more deeply into games. In any case, it was our goal to create a book that could inspire new bodies of knowledge by sharing existing ones.

While we could simply suggest that you begin at the beginning and work your way through to the end, given our diverse audience, this may not be the best approach. Luckily, we do have an answer to the challenge of using this book, something to help game theorists, game writers, game designers, design educators, game critics, and fans find what they need.

As a kind of “strategy guide” to reading this book, we have created a series of broad subject areas—Topics—that can be used as skeleton keys to unlock the volume at hand. Some Topics represent an idea fundamental to the study of games, such as *Game Design Models* or *The Player Experience*. Others cover emerging areas of research, such as *Game Communities* or *Game Spaces*. There are fourteen Topics in all:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| The Player Experience | Speaking of Games |
| The Rules of a Game | Game Design Models |
| Gaming the Game | Game Economies |
| The Game Design Process | Game Spaces |
| Player and Character | Cultural Representation |
| Games and Narrative | What Is a Game? |
| Game Communities | What Is Play? |

Each Topic is linked to several of the texts that make up the book. Most of the texts, in turn, appear in more than one Topic. For example, Richard Garfield’s detailed case study “The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering” appears in the Topics *The Game Design Process* and *Game Economies*. Reading Garfield’s essay within two distinct Topics brings out different aspects of his analysis, highlighting specific facets of his core concerns.

Each of the fourteen Topics is summarized in a brief Topic Essay that identifies a set of key ideas and questions, and links that Topic’s essays together. After each Topic Essay, suggestions for additional resources, including chapters from our previous book, *Rules of Play*, are listed. The Topic Essays can be found in the section following this introduction.

We developed the Topics as a way to create connective tissue between contributions, highlight common themes, and give readers a place to begin. There are, of course, many ways to organize the texts in this collection. The linear organization of the book, for example, was designed with a certain internal logic. Other approaches will emerge as you bring in your own interests. Feel free to mix and match Topics and essays to structure a range of game-related

courses, target specific areas of learning for students and professionals, or otherwise reveal hidden connections between contributions. Ultimately it is up to each reader to discover the best way of using *The Game Design Reader*, and it is our hope that the Topics will act as jumping off points for more intricate and sophisticated approaches to come.

The Book Awaits

Following the Topic Essays comes the true soul of the book: its anthology of 33 texts. Each begins with a short author biography and a statement of context, written in most cases by the authors themselves, addressing the why, when, and how the essay was written.

Between groups of essays are a number of “interstitials”—visual essays, game documentation, or other cultural ephemera that work between and around the main essays. These interstitials [designed by Katie] are meant to provide a visual break, and often act in counterpoint to the group of essays that follow.

The Game Design Reader has been a long time in the making. It is a first-of-a-kind anthology, a testament to the brilliance of our young field, a book with the feeling of a truly great party, where all of the guests, despite themselves, wind up mixing with everyone else like old friends.

We’d love for you to come and mix it up, too. It is our hope that *The Reader* works not just as a historical document, but also as a future catalyst for new thinking, new writing, and better yet, lots and lots of new games. We think the view from the shoulders of giants is glorious indeed. It is time for the refugees to come in from out of the storm: we have found a home at last.

A Note on Consistency

This volume includes texts from a range of sources, each with its own approach to referencing games (capitalized vs. uncapitalized, italic vs. nonitalic), the spelling of popular terms (gameplay vs. game play; videogame vs. video game, etc.), and bibliographic format. In remaining true to the voices of the authors, we chose to preserve the texts as they originally appeared.

In addition, essays that exist as book chapters sometimes reference the books from which they were taken. If the chapter piques your interest, we heartily recommend you read the entire book!

Web Resources

Beyond the texts collected between these covers, we recommend the following websites as starting resources for learning more about game design, game scholarship, the game industry, and game culture.

Industry

www.igda.org
www.gamasutra.com
www.theesa.com

Academic

www.digra.org
www.seriousgames.org
www.educationarcade.com
www.gamestudies.org

Journalism

www.gamegirladvance.com
www.extra-life.org.uk/wiki
<http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games>

Blogs

www.designersnotebook.com
www.ludology.org
http://terranova.blogs.com
www.costik.com/blog
www.grandtextauto.org
www.deepfun.com
www.quartertofour.com
www.gamedevblog.com
www.game-research.org
www.GameMatters.com
www.thegameblog.com
www.playcube.org

Topic Essays

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

The Game Design Reader Salen and Zimmerman

- 3** **The Player Experience**
What kinds of play experiences do games provide?
- 9** **The Rules of a Game**
What are rules and how do they relate to play?
- 15** **Gaming the Game**
How and why do players bend, break, and remake rules?
- 21** **The Game Design Process**
How do designers approach the process of making games?
- 27** **Player and Character**
What is the complex relationship between game player and game character?
- 33** **Games and Narrative**
What are the relationships between story, game, and narrative play?
- 39** **Game Communities**
What are the forms and meanings of social interaction in a game?
- 45** **Speaking of Games**
What ideologies inform the discourse of games?
- 53** **Game Design Models**
What are formal ways of understanding how games work?
- 59** **Game Economies**
How do game experiences emerge through systems of exchange?
- 65** **Game Spaces**
What does space contribute to the experience of play?
- 71** **Cultural Representation**
What aspects of culture do games model and represent?
- 77** **What is a Game?**
How can we define what makes a game a game?
- 83** **What is Play?**
What are the forms and meanings of play?