

### **Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games**

*David Myers*

Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010. Illustrations, notes, references, index. 184 pp. \$70.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780472050925

In *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games*, David Myers presents a unique and inspiring perspective on game theory and game studies. A formalist, Myers tackles issues that have been sparsely addressed in theoretical frameworks—most notably the works of game theorists Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Torben Grodal, Espen Aarseth, and Brian Sutton-Smith. Myers provides a respectful yet critical assessment of these authors' insights and poses a number of questions that require further investigation. He contends a grasp of the essence of digital game play requires an enhanced formal understanding of the player-game relationship.

One of the more important contributions of *Play Redux* resides in the establishment of a direct link between the semiotic way computer games “generate and transform meanings through the coded manipulation of signs and symbols” (p. 5) and the prelinguistic, psycho-physical functions of human thinking. Myers provides a convincing description of this relationship, and, more importantly, documents his argument in large detail by taking sidesteps toward educational theory, philosophy, game theory, and cognitive psychology. In doing so, he avoids making the mistake he identifies as a main cause of the receding influence of formalist theory in the second half of the twentieth century: it has not succeeded in establishing its ontological foundations.

Myers has been investigating digital game semiotics for more than twenty-five years, and this gives him an advantage over many of his peers. In his earlier work, he has studied the interactive nature of digital game play on a micro-level, regarding both the structure of player cognition (in his 1984 article “The Pattern of Player-Game Relationships”) and the transformative characteristics of in-game objects and relationships (in his 1991 article “Time, Symbol Manipulation, and Computer Games”). In his book *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis* (2003), Myers additionally applied these insights to the semiotic analysis of a variety of game genres and titles—hereby supporting the assertion that his theory can be considered as both universal and fundamental. That he can build on his past research has enabled Myers to adopt a top-down point of view and to consider game play in terms of its essential, conceptual characteristics. It also enables him to explain a topic as complicated as recursive semiosis in a comprehensible and lively fashion. *Play Redux* simultaneously appeals to scholars who specialize in semiotics and scholars who have a remote interest in meaning creation in all its facets, a rare feat for any work.

Myers has never shied away from tackling controversial topics, and *Play Redux* is no exception. His point of view on cheating, the magic circle, virtual relationships, or the distinction between simulation, game, and play does not always agree with the positions defended by colleagues who adopt a cultural, social, or psychological point of view. Rather than complicating matters, however, Myers's insights clarify issues. Herein lies one great advantage of

the formalist approach. Because formal analysis is neither preoccupied with social, cultural, political, or economic issues, it is able to produce an almost mathematical clarity. It is difficult to disagree with Myers's rationale because his argument is always precisely articulated and constructed with a strong internal logic.

As Myers points out, the investigation of the sender or receiver side of the communication process is of no concern to the formal researcher. Nevertheless the relevance of Myers's work stretches far into the domain of cultural, social, and psychological research. There are, for example, striking similarities to research on the educational use of digital games—although Myers refuses to consider his framework as a learning or socialization theory. Sim-

ilarly, Myers's interpretation of habituation resembles a wide range of notions that have been used to analyze digital games from a player-centered perspective, including Gordon Calleja's theory of incorporation, Tilo Hartmann's research on automatic appraisals, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Myers's ideas connect closely to a recent trend in game studies that values the investigation of player experiences over the investigation of game content. Accordingly, *Play Redux* contains a wealth of insights that carry the potential to motivate, guide, inspire, and steer future research into a wide range of yet uncovered domains.

---

—Steven Malliet, *University of Antwerp, Antwerp, The Netherlands*