

to move forward in technological development. Intervention therefore means creating and contributing to an existing system in order to challenge assumptions and offer new ways of proceeding. We see how games traverse the spaces where once they might have been pigeonholed. Through their nature as play within the ludic transversal, they are a pure electrate practice, thus bridging the dichotomy of work/play and becoming an inter/vention.

As we move further into the digital era, the concept of electracy will gain more attention, just as literacy gained attention in oral culture. Holmevik's work tells us that play—with its impact on digitally mediated environments of gaming—is deeply embedded as an inter/vention in being electrate. This book will become a reference and a seminal work in understanding the place of play in electracy.

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The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect

Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke

New York: Welcome Books, 2012.

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The Art of Video Games, by Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, published in cooperation with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is a catalog and companion to a high-profile exhibition of the same name that opened at the Smithsonian facility in Washington, DC, in 2012 and is scheduled to travel to many

regional museums. This is a lushly illustrated coffee-table book that offers readers full-page, color photographs and succinct summaries of video games, descriptions of their significance, and interviews with many of their creators. Slick and gorgeous, the book offers an important permanent, widely distributable, inexpensive complement to the exhibition.

Given the noise the Smithsonian exhibition has stirred up, the bar was high for Melissinos and O'Rourke: the authors needed to prove video games worthy of the moniker "art" and of their standing as part of the "record of the American experience," to pull a quote from the museum's publicity. But for those of us who have long been making, studying, using, and advocating for video games, the mere fact of the exhibit and its publication counts as a success—not so much because the likes of game designers David Crane and Ron Gilbert now find a place beside artists David Hockney and Mary Cassatt, but because video games *do* belong in a record of the American experience. Melissinos and O'Rourke deserve praise for having spearheaded the project.

Beyond that abstract victory, *The Art of Video Games* is a bittersweet triumph for those with a more nuanced interest in and understanding of video game history. The book's organization of the history of video games into five eras offers an admirable summary of the key trends and shifts in the gaming landscape. Of course, so did earlier illustrated histories such as Rusel DeMaria and Johnny L. Wilson's *High Score! The Illustrated History of Video Games* (McGraw Hill, 2002), though the latter never reached beyond the enthusiast and is now out of print.

But while the shiny pages and full-color spreads telegraph official approval, the content is sometimes incomplete and inaccurate. I will pick as an example something I know well, the 1977 Atari Video Computer System (VCS), also known as the Atari 2600. The authors get a lot right. Their coverage of VCS titles such as *Pitfall!* and the Atari port of *Pac-Man*, for example, discusses the important technical and historical situations that influenced the creation of these games. But they are less sure-footed in their discussion of *Combat*, the pack-in title that shipped with the Atari VCS in 1977. They correctly identify it as a port of the Key Games title *Tank*, but they also draw the conclusion that “developers were just starting to learn how to wring experience from the new platform. As such, *Combat* was a two-player activity with no computer-controlled competitor in the game” (p.15). There’s no denying that the title is two-player only, but the reasons for that are more complicated than this conclusion warrants. In fact, video games of the mid-1970s were primarily two-player head-to-head affairs, and the VCS platform was designed to facilitate such experiences—and not much else. The authors write from a contemporary view, one in which a video game that requires two players is anomalous. Melissinos and O’Rourke probably know this well, but in the couple hundred words they devote to each of the titles the book covers, omissions sometimes lead to misunderstandings. That *Combat* is the first game discussed in the book makes these limitations particularly noticeable.

While *The Art of Video Games* shouldn’t be mistaken for a traditional piece of academic scholarship, there is no doubt that

the book’s target audience will learn things they might not otherwise have considered. Few will really read the book as an argument—it is a coffee-table book, after all. In this respect, the book must be understood as a printed, bound version of the gallery notes that accompany the exhibition. An astute reader, particularly one accustomed to exhibition catalogs, might observe that the best such catalogs take advantage of the medium of print to go into greater detail than might be possible on gallery walls. In that respect, Melissinos and O’Rourke miss an opportunity to explore in deeper detail some of the points they can raise only briefly on the gallery walls.

Perhaps there lies the problem *The Art of Video Games* really poses: how seriously should we take games as a cultural form from the perspective of institutionalization and historical record? Seriously enough to put them in the Smithsonian for a spell, but what does that accomplishment signify? Does it mean that games have been recognized as art? Or just that—even though the book includes as much material from Japan as it does from the United States—the games have been recognized as Americana, that they have more in common with the American Art Museum’s collections of graphic art, folk art, crafts, and decorative art?

This problem is not addressed in *The Art of Video Games*. In her foreword, Smithsonian American Art Museum director Elizabeth Broun seems to take the whole affair as a kind of curiosity, like something that happened while she was at lunch. “I owe a huge debt of thanks to Chris Melissinos,” she writes, “for helping us bridge the gap between the traditions of an art museum and the vast world of

gaming” (p. 7). But this gap has been in the process of being closed by creators and curators for more than two decades, from artists like Cory Arcangel and Mary Flanagan to curators like the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Christiane Paul and the American Museum of the Moving Image’s Carl Goodman to institutions like The Strong through its International Center for the History of Electronic Games. If the book’s primary accomplishment amounts

to its association with the Smithsonian, then it leaves the serious reader with a challenge. Once the ceremony and bluster wears off, once video games have been dubbed art by a hallowed cultural and historical institution, shouldn’t we have bigger, more interesting aspirations for them?

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