

Steven Poole, *Trigger Happy – The Inner Life of Video Games*, 2nd edn. London: Fourth Estate, 2001.

To date, little has been published about videogames, despite a strong case being made for arguing their cultural importance. In addition, there has been an emphasis upon the anti-social consequences of videogaming rather than a discussion of their cultural significance. Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy* (2001) aims to fill this gap, and is the second edition of the book, revised from the original manuscript (2000) to include the latest developments in the gaming world. *Trigger Happy* is a multi-faceted read, which, like many of Fourth Estate's popular science texts, combines high-brow academic appeal with detailed and rich description that is pleasurable to follow for the non-specialist. For anyone growing up with videogame consoles in the 1970s and 1980s, it reads as a nostalgic tribute to endless hours in front of a screen. The text demonstrates how the study of videogames lends itself to a vast array of cultural studies subjects, from social theory to personal ethnography, and even lays claim to the artistic status of videogames.

The book is scattered with references to important and relevant works, such as Herz's *Joystick Nation* (1997) and Sheff's *Game Over* (1993). However, the lack of theoretical depth that speaks directly to gaming results in a trade-off between analysis and description, which could leave academics a little disoriented when trying to contextualize videogaming. References are made to thinkers such as Foucault, Heidegger, Huizinga, Gibson, Adorno, Wittgenstein and even Plato: an 'A-list' of references but also a telling indication of the uneven theoretical coherency upon which the author bases the descriptive content about video games. It is also a rather surprising list of references, where one might have expected to see the likes of the Krokors, Weinstein, Virilio or Rheingold.

The publication is marketed alongside other popular science celebrities such as Kevin Kelly, Simon Singh and Matt Ridley. Among such authors, the book fits well as an engaging and entertaining allegory. If your interest is new media and inspiring new trends that challenge convention, then this book is definitely for you. The author shines in the introductory chapter, stating the case for why computer games are socially significant. With conviction, Poole refutes the elitist view held by many cultural critics, that videogames represent the dumbing-down of culture. For the non-gamer, the next chapter gives an insight into the major landmarks of videogame history. Analytically, the chapter is a little wanting, though the detail in description is necessary and sets up the analysis very well, continually reinforcing the need to study this phenomenon.

Chapter 3 engages with some serious metaphysical discussion about the ways in which videogames mediate (un)reality. Videogames, Poole argues, deliberately construct artificial realities with a prescribed level of real-world aesthetics, which goes far beyond the structural and visual components. Videogames challenge concepts of life, death, play, work and even embodiment. As Poole states, 'videogames redefine a "life" as an expendable, iterable part of a larger campaign' (p. 68). The talent of videogame designers is, for Poole, an ability to represent what is intuitive; a game must have good *playability* while maintaining a distance from the effort and pain of real life.

In the next two chapters, Poole fleshes out the conceptual differences between various creative industries, critiquing links between videogames, cinematography and art. With such cinematic flops as *Tomb Raider* and *Final Fantasy VII: The Spirits Within* for examples, there is no difficulty in accepting Poole's claim that films are not really similar to videogames. Nevertheless, also in line with Poole, we

might also accept that videogame technology is playing an increasing role in cinematography, *The Matrix* providing a key example.

Poole unpacks the way in which a videogame challenges the concept of story telling as a linear experience. He notes how videogames allow the gamer to play an active part in telling the story – comparable to ‘choose your own adventure’ books. While most graphic-based games are still limited in the number of choices that can be taken by a player, their opportunity for diverse story telling is far greater than any interactive book. While noting the relevance of ‘God games’, such as *SimCity*, text-based role playing games (RPGs) are overlooked here, which seems a lost opportunity in this discourse of story telling. RPGs such as *Dragonrealm*, which are based solely on textual descriptions are, arguably, the most intellectually challenging, imaginative and open-ended method of story creation within any videogame. They are also of huge social importance through the simple fact of their pseudo-community status, though Poole does not dwell on these phenomena.

The book then addresses the technical structures of videogames, aiming to further reveal how games design and construct their unreality. Chapter 7 is more appealing to the cultural theorist, dealing with issues of gender, idolatry and the possibility of developing character through videogames. Not surprisingly, *Tomb Raider’s* Lara Croft emerges as a case study and comparisons are, again, made between videogames and cinema. For Poole, videogame characters are false idols in the same sense that comic strip characters are. For this very reason, they are also more revealing as a reflection of social ideals than are real people.

The final chapters find Poole once more creating links between videogaming and social theory. The author notes that, today, technology is highly domesticated, with televisions, video recorders and hi-fi systems dominating home-space. The videogame console is no exception and the key example of this is the PlayStation. As Poole suggests the ‘very name continues the proselytising argument: it is the antithesis of a workstation’ (p. 172).

Poole delves into a semiological analysis of videogames, beginning with a curious ‘new-Marxian parable of late capitalism’ in the form of the ever-consuming (and finally, self-consuming) *Pac-Man*. Poole’s analysis reveals the semiological possibilities of videogames. Yet, the argument does not move much beyond *Pac-Man* (and, for now, it need not). Poole invites the reader to take seriously the cultural significance of videogames.

Finally, Poole revisits issues about videogames and their alleged connection with deviant behaviour; promptly rejecting them as speculative. The videogame industry is still developing and remains largely unexplored by social scientists. Yet, it is replete with reasons for seeking a new theoretical angle on the phenomenon, which *Trigger Happy* reveals convincingly.

References

- Herz, J.C. (1997) *Joystick Nation*. London: Abacus.
Sheff, D. (1993) *Game Over: Nintendo’s Battle to Dominate Videogames*. New York: Random House.

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