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**Understanding video games:
the essential introduction**
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It is not unusual for a particular object starting on its journey towards its legitimate scientific establishment to encounter obstacles that try to repudiate, refute or minimise its value, in an attempt to prove its worthlessness. In fact, history provides many examples that confirm this. Let us consider, for example, culture or, to be more specific, the popular 'low' culture – it was long despised, marked as inherently inferior, empty, meaningless and as such unworthy of consumption and research attention. The consumers of popular movies, popular music etc. were (and occasionally still are) seen as people incapable of critical reflection who, through only partially modified products, receive the same content over and over again whereby the products, themselves addressed in a similar way, in one way or another function as a lullaby – preventing their users from gaining an insight into an ideology of the existing system. It could also be said that anything new is sooner rejected than not. It is namely something that is not in line with current norms, while it could threaten the existing frames even though it is minor and itself endangered.

The same can be said for video games – they are popular, with millions of people playing them every day but, at the same time: why would anyone waste their time on such trifling matters? Why would anyone smear the shining scientific theories that use much more important – whatever that actually means – cultural artefacts as subjects for their research with something so banal and shallow as video games? It is, in fact, precisely here that we could start stacking up a variety of bricks from several fields, thus being intentionally eclectic, and build something greater than just the sum of the individual pieces. It is something marked as trivial and meaningless that holds worthwhile potential. It is something minor that promises great development.

Studies of video games are not yet well established. It was only at the beginning of the 21st century that they started on their path towards being a unique object of research and, therefore, more than simply a fraction of already existing theories and programmes about digital media. In other words, their autonomous field is minor, and hence a lot of work remains to be done before we can slowly start to *understand* them. Their language has yet to be learned, the meaning arising from them, previously labelled meaningless, is still in its infant state so why would we not start work on developing this topic

with some principles offered by a good introduction?

The book *Understanding video games: the essential introduction*, describing itself as "the first general introduction to the exciting new field of video game studies" (p. 2), is just that – a basis that allows us to take the first steps before we break into a gallop with attempts to solve the deeper problems of this relatively new medium or detect its advanced and still unknown dimensions. The authors of the book convincingly demonstrate their in-depth knowledge of the area which is transmitted to us by comprehensively tackling the launch of this scientific field, bringing in the major theories for analysing video games and extensively equipping the latter with illustrations and examples.

Anyone interested in this field under consideration is confronted in the book by several issues and critical questions concerning it. Early in the book we are, for instance, faced with the dilemma of defining what video games actually are. While the book does not offer a single, agreed definition and provide a clear answer, that is in fact not the authors' intention and hence should not be seen a deficiency. Or, as Freud put it, is there any science that begins with clear-cut definitions of its basic concepts, without some indefiniteness in them?

Of course, as part of a particular culture(s), video games cannot be separated from their economic and other contexts, such as aesthetic and value ones. Accordingly, the book offers a brief insight into the game industry, places the discussed artefacts into the much larger, capitalist game and then continues by, as mentioned, tackling what video games really are, what their essential characteristics could be, which components should not be lacking for a product to be called a video game. The history of (video) games is then provided, starting from the game of Senet in Ancient Egypt, in around 3500 B.C. through to the latest developments in industry involving mobile, social and casual gaming. Even though the latter is not completely excluded from this first edition of the book being reviewed here, one could say that the most recent trends have, in fact, been overlooked. However, it should also be mentioned that the description given of the second edition (2012) announces that this area has been enriched. After a comforting walk through history, the authors turn to video game aesthetics, understood as something that contains all aspects of video games experienced by a player (audio and graphic dimensions, for instance, as well as the rules of the game, their settings etc.). The book also does not leave out the video game and players' culture, which travels around and beyond the games themselves and encompasses stories, poems, flash movies, beta-tester events and video game athletes, that are all rooted in the video game field and have moved beyond it by transferring games to other contexts and areas.

Another noteworthy transfer achieved by games is one that deals with narratology. Actually, we should

speak of the augmentation of some older paradigms which reciprocally inspire and encourage the first steps of this or any new science. Stories represent a key element of games, even though it cannot be said that they are *the* dimension of them. Here, one is reminded of Vladimir Propp who is also mentioned in the book, although in a different way, and known for his analysis of components of Russian folk tales. Even though his analysis is useful for addressing many issues related to fairy tales, it remains silent when we try to find a key point that makes a particular fairy tale truly magical and unique. The rules themselves cannot provide an answer to this. Similarly, stories are only one part of games, which is recognised by the so-called ludologists. While their (re)search is not oriented to the impossible discovery of the magical component of games, they complement the narrative with the intrinsic properties of video games.

The last two chapters of the book raise questions about 'serious games', of the potential games hold beyond mere entertainment and also about risks, mainly concerning violence. It is here that a few shortcomings of the book can be noted, in addition to the one mentioned above. Regarding 'serious games', a critical reflection on the term itself is missed. The term can lead to the conclusion that all other games are just unimportant, meaningless entertainment, merely embodying the fulfilment of players' free time. Is, for instance, the fact that

playing can even cause neglect of basic human needs, such as nourishment and sleep, not serious enough for that signifier? In addition, is it not possible to regard the meaninglessness itself as something productive, something that belongs to an order apart from that of rationality which we are constantly forced to accept? Precisely here we could also deal with the political potential of video games, going beyond just the inclusion of propaganda in them, as mentioned in the book. Another area the book does not touch, albeit the authors do not try to conceal that, is the Eastern context where the video game industry is so flourishing that it deserves at least a short section of its own; if nothing else, to allow a rough comparison.

In conclusion, let us again note that the book does not pretend to be anything other than an introduction to a field that is bursting with potential. It is an excellent asset and a basis for the nascent field, yet anyone with a deeper interest in the scientific field of video games will need to complement its starting points with further reading. Sometimes a more profound *understanding* can, for example, be reached by more exhaustively examining the maladies of games since deviations often help us move towards that aim by emphasising otherwise less noticeable properties. Alternatively, as suggested in the book, participant observation, i.e. active engagement in playing games, is perhaps one way to overcome the public's negative perception of

them, which is often in clear contrast to how gamers view them. In other words, video games should be researched through the cross-fertilisation of theory and practice. In accordance with this, we can reformulate the statement made by the character Joshua in the well-known movie War Games ("*A strange game. The only winning move is not to play*") and say that *the only winning move* to successfully continue to travel *is precisely to play*.

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Nanopolitics is a compendium of texts about embodied experiences in neoliberal cities. The book is distributed by Autonomedia and released as Minor Compositions, a series of texts inclusive of "autonomous politics, avant-garde aesthetics and revolutions of everyday life". The book draws from the 20 workshops the collaborators organised between 2010 and 2012. It is a book of tools, strategies and practices aiming at transcending the rigid ways of doing politics, such as voting, making statements or protesting. The question asked is: how does one think politics with and through the body?

Nanopolitics' authors and activists understand their bodies' potential as inherently political and they are closely connected to academic institutions, giving them the expertise to successfully combine theoretical insights with practice. They propose working together, engaging our physical potential and realising new collective subjectivations. Using creative and artistic approaches, nanopoliticians tend to "make sense with one's senses" (p. 22) and not through finding objective truths or formulas. The micropolitical practices they mention might seem depoliticised, but they lend new emancipatory meanings. "Nano" in the book title is therefore not the "nano" from nanoscience, but "nano" as in small operations connecting people as "bodies in movement, struggle, love, work" (p. 24) etc. The authors of the book propose experimenting with feeling, acting and escaping the normal(ised) ways of inhabiting public and private space(s).

The handbook is divided into five sections which can be read in any order: collective processes, methods and methodology, experiments and experiences, reflections and theorisations and metabolisms and ecologies; the latter proposing how to bake "polenta cakes for friends and comrades". Nanopolitics' insistence on the importance of bodies is theoretically inspired and supported mostly