



The Aesthetic of Play (MIT Press)

By Brian Upton

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The impulse toward play is very ancient, not only pre-cultural but pre-human; zoologists have identified play behaviors in turtles and in chimpanzees. Games have existed since antiquity; 5,000-year-old board games have been recovered from Egyptian tombs. And yet we still lack a critical language for thinking about play. Game designers are better at answering small questions ("Why is this battle boring?") than big ones ("What does this game mean?"). In this book, the game designer Brian Upton analyzes the experience of play -- how playful activities unfold from moment to moment and how the rules we adopt constrain that unfolding. Drawing on games that range from Monopoly to Dungeons & Dragons to Guitar Hero, Upton develops a framework for understanding play, introducing a set of critical tools that can help us analyze games and game designs and identify ways in which they succeed or fail.

Upton also examines the broader epistemological implications of such a framework, exploring the role of play in the construction of meaning and what the existence of play says about the relationship between our thoughts and external reality. He considers the making of meaning in play and in every aspect of human culture, and he draws on findings in pragmatic epistemology, neuroscience, and semiotics to describe how meaning emerges from playful engagement. Upton argues that play can also explain particular aspects of narrative; a play-based interpretive stance, he proposes, can help us understand the structure of books, of music, of theater, of art, and even of the process of critical engagement itself.

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Editorial Review

Review

This book blasts through the sterile dogmas of game studies with a model of play that unites stories, games, and criticism into diverse unity. Upton offers a unique and invigorating perspective on humanity's love affair with the aesthetic experiences of playing by transforming his own skills as a game designer into an intriguing new approach.

(Chris Bateman, Ph.D., game designer, philosopher, and author)

Brian Upton addresses some of the most difficult problems in game scholarship in an enjoyable and highly readable way. This book will be required reading for my graduate students.

(Ernest W. Adams, founder of International Game Developers Association)

Upton's book is a rarity in game design and development texts -- it provides a new way of understanding games both analog and digital that is innovative, tangible, and incredibly valuable for an evolving medium.

(Brenda Romero, game designer, Romero Games)

A bold new approach to thinking about aesthetics through the lens of games and play.

(Frank Lantz, Director, NYU Game Center)

This thoughtful book is unusual in that the author has extensive experience in video game development and also has a strong interest in philosophy, aesthetics, and epistemology.

(*Choice*)

About the Author

Brian Upton cofounded Red Storm Entertainment, where he was lead designer of the popular games Rainbow Six and Ghost Recon. He is now a "script doctor for games" at Sony's Santa Monica Studio.

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