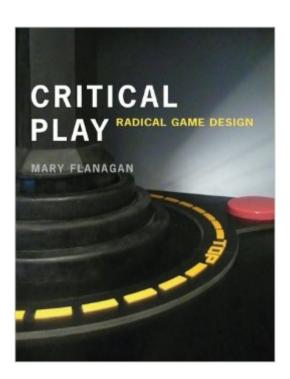# Critical Play: Radical Game Design (MIT Press)

Synopsis

For many players, games are entertainment, diversion, relaxation, fantasy. But what if certain games were something more than this, providing not only outlets for entertainment but a means for creative expression, instruments for conceptual thinking, or tools for social change? In Critical Play, artist and game designer Mary Flanagan examines alternative games -- games that challenge the accepted norms embedded within the gaming industry -- and argues that games designed by artists and activists are reshaping everyday game culture. Flanagan provides a lively historical context for critical play through twentieth-century art movements, connecting subversive game design to subversive art: her examples of "playing house" include Dadaist puppet shows and The Sims. She looks at artists' alternative computer-based games and explores games for change, considering the way activist concerns -- including worldwide poverty and AIDS -- can be incorporated into game design.Arguing that this kind of conscious practice -- which now constitutes the avant-garde of the computer game medium -- can inspire new working methods for designers, Flanagan offers a model for designing that will encourage the subversion of popular gaming tropes through new styles of game making, and proposes a theory of alternate game design that focuses on the reworking of contemporary popular game practices.

Book Information

Series: MIT Press

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press (February 8, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262518651

ISBN-13: 978-0262518659

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #126,886 in Books (See Top 100 in Books)   #18 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > Games & Strategy Guides > Game Design   #62 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > Games & Strategy Guides > Game Programming   #429 inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Video & Computer Games

Customer Reviews

"Critical Play" is one of those rare books that uncovers a world you never knew existed yet has

always lain right before your eyes. I'm a pretty avid gamer, but despite my years spent with mainstream commercial games, it's only recently that I've discovered the serious games movement and designers trying to use games to express big ideas. What I thought was a recent trend, however, Flanagan shows is actually a longstanding, vital tradition. Artists and activists have been using games to communicate social commentary and subvert accepted norms for hundreds of years in an amazing number of ways. "Critical Play" does this incredible job of weaving together games, game theory, art, and activism to show how play can be a vital tool for cultural development.The book is broken into eight chapters starting with a look at domestic play ranging from subversive dollhouses to players modding the Sims. Other chapters examine board games (apparently artists love chess, I had no idea) language games, and what I was most interested in, computer games. Because I'm somewhat familiar with serious games now, I recognized a number of the examples from the video games chapter. What I didn't know was that there are a number of contemporary artists working with games or making game-inspired pieces. The book concludes with a brief chapter that I wish were longer exploring methods of designing for critical play. While I won't be making a game any time soon, the final chapter helped me understand the game design process better, and I think has allowed me to better read the games I play now.I picked up this book because I wanted to deepen my understanding of serious games, but I think it can be appreciated by people from all different backgrounds.

At first glance, games and video games are seen merely as entertainment and/or distraction. Mary Flanagan takes a cultural-historical as well as artistically-tinted look behind the scenes of an otherwise largely one-sided exploration of games and the increasingly popular virtual, electronic forms.The author approaches the idea of games in a remarkably unconventional manner; in her eyes, games - from the board games, dolls to electronic virtual games of the 20th and 21st centuries - are an expression of cultural norms as well as a reflection of societal unrest. Flanagan even goes so far as to suggest that games can also be interpreted as narrative tools in the sense of social "reflectors". Consequently, games also serve as a means to process social problems, based on the restructuring of the games culture through new games and game styles.First of all, the book tries to capture the socio-cultural significance of games by means of a well-founded contextualisation exemplified by a few historical milestones of different types and forms of games. There is also an attempt to record the cultural ambivalence of games. For the most part, Flanagan here follows anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith, who has interpreted games as a narrative form with a catalyst function. According to this, players are able to channel real-world risks, and observe and evaluate

these at a safe distance. Games may therefore highlight real problems in their "downplayed" form and can almost be held up as a mirror to the willing "players" showing their own cultural involvement and participation.Flanagan provides plausible evidence for her theories, from the Dadaist-influenced puppet show of the 20th century to the popular PC series The Sims.

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