Title: Half-Real – Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds
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The first thing that strikes me when I read *Half-Real* is how many of the examples I use and the ideas that I try to get across to my game design students that in some way or another has come from Juul, either via papers, presentations or conversations. Some of them may have their origin somewhere else but for years, Juul has served as something of a hub for the area of game studies bordering to game design, propelling the circulation of thoughts and ideas between scholars and practitioners. This volume, a reworked version of his dissertation, serves as a collection of his academic production from this period.

Juul's method of conducting research is focused on his own first-person experience of playing games. We can think of Juul as a player who is not interested in his own particular experience of playing games, but in the meaningful interpretations he can make of games themselves from playing them, much like a literary scholar wanting to say something about literature as an art form from reading books. Through this process he wants to develop the aesthetic field of game studies. It seems to me that the term *aesthetics* does not quite contain what this book is about but when Juul later states that his intention is to present a coherent theory of video games I feel that he instead gives a too broad declaration of what this book represents. There are many aspects of game studies that are left unconsidered which would require other methods of investigation in order to be meaningfully explored.

Juul's fundamental thesis is that games are a combination of *rules* and *fiction* where rules represent what is real in the description of video games as *half-real*. From my vantage point it seems that analytical concepts like *player* and *representation* are just as fundamental. I believe that there is no real conflict of ideas here but that maybe Juul would have benefited from defining his particular perspective on the object of study more clearly. This could also have helped to tie together the different parts of the book to a more coherent whole.

Juul is at his best when he discusses game rules and their relation to game fiction, and this discussion constitutes a significant part of the book. Including his distinction of *games of emergence* from *games of progression*, this section offers a multitude of interesting ideas around the role of rules in games which are aptly illustrated with examples often including figures from different games. Sometimes the pace is brought down by a slightly too detailed level in his reasoning. This is, however, a price I am most willing to pay for this sharp and well structures analysis.

The section of the book devoted to defining what games are is problematic in several ways. For one thing, the approach of comparing different definitions from different times and different perspectives is not very fruitful. To point out that a scholar who was active before professional sports and massively multi-player online games existed has defined

games in a way that poorly accounts for these activities is nothing more than an example of how these definitions are unavoidably rooted in their context and that the definitions of today will be just as outdated eventually.

I cannot see the reason for spending such a large part of the book on the issue of giving a definition of games that can account for all situations and all instances. It is of course important to let us know what lets the term represent in the context of this book, but that should not have to take a whole chapter. To Juul's defense I would like to add that what he calls *the classical game model* works well as an analytical tool to foreground what is new in video games compared to traditional games and, more importantly, he doe not let his definition limit his own discussions. Especially his more recent work has focused on the ambiguity of games with examples both close to and on"the wrong side" of the borders his definition draws up.

Juul's conclusion that games are half-real – the game rules are real while the game world is fictional – again reminds me that what you see when observing an object heavily depends on your perspective. By saying this, I do not mean to take anything away form his theoretical reflections, only position them within the much broader context of game studies as a whole. Juul offers an insightful and analytically sharp view of video games from an aesthetically grounded perspective and while the scope of this book may be narrower that the author claims, it makes for a very interesting reading for anyone interested in the inner anatomy of video games.

This year has brought us an unprecedented number of academic books on the topic of video games. When I try to use this book to understand the state of game studies it becomes clear that Juul is taking part in mapping out the field. This can explain what I have perceived as a problem of clear positioning but is also what makes the book so interesting. Juul is not trying out new routes in familiar waters; he is exploring previously more or less uncharted territories and drawing the map as he goes.

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