

**Book Review: *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*, by Patrick Jagoda. 2020. The University of Chicago Press. xi + 386 pp.**

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*Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*, a text focusing on the potential of games to “impact player subjectivity” (p. 53), takes a unique standpoint compared to other design texts and game analyses. From the start, Jagoda clarifies his book’s argument: “games, including video games, serve as a form for staging, encountering, processing, and testing experience and reality in the twenty-first century” (p. xi). He goes further with this argument, positing that games are an experimental medium that can be utilised for fundamental social change. The text examines how experimentation through games is an underused framework, mode of inquiry, and intervention within the context of neoliberalism. Jagoda recognises neoliberalism as a “polyvalent” term encompassing the “free market, individual entrepreneurship, private property rights, financialization, and practices of deregulation” (p. 9). Aside from the rise of neoliberal values taking place concurrently with the rise of digital games, Jagoda makes a distinct connection between neoliberalism and games. According to him, “games simultaneously index and drive the development of neoliberalism. The competition, repetition, and quantified objectives that make up gamified designs, in both entertainment and applied games, correspond with some of the most pernicious aspects of advanced capitalism” (p. 12). Thus, Jagoda asks: Can games be used to alter modern day mindsets?

*Experimental Games* is divided into three parts. Part I, “Framework,” comprises the introduction and two theoretical chapters, titled “Gamification” and “Experimentation.” Part II, “Concepts,” consists in four chapters: “Choice,” “Control,” “Difficulty,” and “Failure.” Lastly, Part III, “Design,” includes the two chapters “Improvisation” and “Joy.” Each chapter contains exemplary game analyses in which Jagoda further

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unpacks and grounds the definitions and applications of the titular concepts, and the affordances games offer as an experiential, experimental medium. Throughout his book, Jagoda does not focus on what one might typically consider “experimental” or “avant-garde” games, but rather on the potential for experimentation within the medium-specific affordances of games by including a wide variety of game genres: indie games, queer games, and his design work for the alternate reality game (ARG), *the parasite* (Fourcast Lab, 2017).

Jagoda predicates this book on three guiding principles, introduced in Part I: (1) the omnipresent socioeconomic and historical context of neoliberalism, (2) the emergence and continuance of gamification as a design philosophy under neoliberalism, and (3) the powerful potential of experimentation as a mode of intervention. Jagoda defines gamification early on, noting that it “marks a condition of seepage or doubling through which game mechanics and activities influence work, leisure, thought, and social relations” (p. 12). In other words, game elements increasingly appear in everyday interactions via gamification. Neoliberalism, for this text, is not the enemy, but rather the specific sociocultural context in which design and play must exist. Within the context of neoliberal society, Jagoda posits that gamification has ultimately shaped how designers and players understand games. Finally, Jagoda encourages us to view experimentation as the intersection of science—a formal methodology for controlling variables and unpredictable outcomes—and the arts—a method of producing affect and uncertainty as an experiential form. One of the key guiding questions Jagoda asks in this section is: “How might the art of game design move beyond normative gamification and enable new forms of decision-making and unanticipated patterns of activity?” (p. 75). The question is paired with a concern that “action-oriented ideologies” are currently a hegemonic force in game design, where reaction precedes conscious thought in players. Though Jagoda poses this query and sets it up to be answered in this limited case analysis, it is not clear what his answer is. He nods to speed in *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998) as a defining feature of play and highlights that experimentation takes the form of tactics in response to real-time issues, but he does not anchor it back into the questions posed at the start of this section.

Organised as a framework based on game studies concepts, the chapters in Part II offer a point of intervention as each concept houses “the potential to create new ways of being, acting, and experimenting within (and perhaps beyond) our digital and networked present” (p. 39). Jagoda argues that these concepts (choice, control, difficulty, and failure) are “central to the framework of neoliberalism but also serve as internal pressure points . . . to exploit that worldview” (p. 34). The concepts Jagoda presents here are both integral in designing experiences in this contemporary moment but are equally analytical tools that can allow for the critique of neoliberalism. According to

Jagoda, then, these concepts offer a holistic toolkit to engage with, and challenge, the existing norms around gamification and neoliberalism (precarity, regulation, policing, rationality) through making or analysing games. Jagoda uses the various game analyses in each chapter to show the breadth of ways that games can activate these concepts as modes of critique. An example is *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013) in the "Choice" chapter. Jagoda argues that the game "invites players, as collaborators, into the experiment that is cofacilitated through the activity of gameplay" (p. 127). By unveiling the process of decision-making, players can recognise the limitations of their choices, but also engage in trial-and-error experimentation. For Jagoda, this example is representative of his ideas of experimental gameplay as the choices posed disrupt the play and "requires players to think about the constructions of systems in which they are temporarily participating" (p. 135) and not just existing as players in the game's flow.

In Part III, Jagoda draws upon his own design experience to discuss improvisation and joy through his ARG, *the parasite*—a game based around a university orientation, a secret society, and a variety of multimedia experiences. The analysis of the game itself is worth reading this book for, as it reflects the requirement of improvisation when running a real-time-live-multiplayer experience, a topic that has yet to be discussed elsewhere. Improvisation is undertheorised in digital games and ARG, compared to its roleplaying and theatrical game counterparts. Jagoda gets the ball rolling for further discussions about how improvisation is "a development practice, experimental process, and creative capacity" (p. 254). It leans into his key argument that games can, in fact, be a source of "problem finding" and "problem making" rather than the positivistic stance of "problem solving" that many scholars and game designers focus on at the expense of other engagement modalities.

Overall, Jagoda covers extensively the guiding principles of gamification and experimentation, but his book would benefit from more consistent discourse-marking in Part II and Part III. With the breadth and interconnectedness of these concepts, reiterating their purpose within gamification and experimentation would have allowed the reader to better understand all the concepts at play. An interesting side note within the "Gamification" chapter is that Jagoda suggests to readers who are more interested in "game studies and media aesthetics than in the intellectual history of economics" (p. 45) to skip the first three sections of this chapter and move directly to the analysis section. Considering that these "skippable" sections review the importance of economics alongside the emergence of digital games from the military-industrial complex into an entertainment entity underneath neoliberalism, disregarding them undermines Jagoda's contextualising efforts, especially since they are reiterated throughout the text as anchor points for his argument. I would personally encourage any readers tempted to

skip these sections to ignore Jagoda's offer and read them as he connects historical contexts and concepts to generate a unique historical backdrop from which gamification arises. In this chapter overall, Jagoda does well to ensure the reader is wholly familiar with the contexts of post-war Western society and the historical importance of the Cold War in conjunction with his conceptual elaboration around gamification and experimentation by the end of the text.

Furthermore, Jagoda identifies how this book operates in game studies, digital humanities, and critical design, and how it exists at the intersection of history, economics, and affect theory. While vast and comprehensive in its engagement with economic game theory, behavioural economics, and more, *Experimental Games* could be considered a dense read for those without pre-existing knowledge on this matter. Jagoda makes significant steps in some areas (e.g., his discussion of rational choice theory in the "Choice" chapter) to guide the reader in these complex theoretical engagements, but in some areas relies on the reader to follow along instead. Nevertheless, this book does well overall to introduce scholars operating outside these histories and paradigms to their potential for studying games as a cultural phenomenon.

As a deep dive into a specific concept, each chapter acts as a standalone intervention for readers to gain insight into how each concept works in tandem with our contemporary context that informs design and play practices. Jagoda is reflexive and critical in his stances, without undermining his argument's directness. If anything, this gives space to larger critiques that he cannot cover within the text's scope without deviating from his demarcated central arguments. This book offers key case studies in experimental modes of mechanics, gameplay, narrative, and more. The combination of neoliberalism and gamification within Jagoda's exposition of historical game contexts is arguably new to game studies and provides unique insights and frameworks to engage with games.

*Experimental Games* is a book for scholars interested in games as a critical, artistic, digital media, but equally for scholars who may not have a grasp of how much neoliberalism and the tools of gamification weave into design and play practices, and how games can generate a possibility space to challenge these overarching paradigms. There is great potential in games, and this book provides a point of entry for scholars and designers to continue grappling with this potential and further interrogate the ideologies and structures around and within game spaces.

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