

Foreword to:

CHARACTERISTICS OF GAMES

By Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield, Robert Gutschera

1.

When Richard, Robert, and Skaff approached me about writing the forward for their book and I cracked the first pages of the manuscript, I must admit I was taken by surprise. The book they had written goes against the grain.

Unlike the spate of publications about games hitting shelves over the last few years, *Characteristics of Games* is not brimming with promises about how games are going to change the world. This book is not going to tell you how games are going to revolutionize education, business, society, or other aspects of Life as We Know It.

There is nothing wrong with those kinds of books. But they often miss the trees for the forest. In promising a grand purpose and glorious future for games, they generally neglect to look closely at games themselves.

Characteristics of Games is different. It is a meticulous book about the design of games by some of the legendary craftsmen of the form. It is an investigation into the *details* of games – the nuts and bolts minutia of how games actually work.

As book readers go, I swing both ways. I can enjoy riding high on the hype about games – because, truth be told, I *do* believe that games represent the most vital and vibrant form of culture today, and that they have the power to transform our society in ways we can scarcely imagine.

But getting there isn't going to happen by reading books about how great they are. It is going to happen through the rigorous work of brilliant designers and theoreticians, slowly unlocking the great secrets of games. The book you hold in your hands charts just this kind of journey; *Characteristics of Games* may say less, but do more.

2.

Games have a *very* long history – from their roots in the play of higher mammals, to ancient sports and games of millennia past, up through today's complex boardgames and videogames. Although we find ourselves in a time when games seem newly relevant, the truth is that games are nothing new. As a wellspring of pleasure, games are a cultural universal: our species, it seems, has always liked to play them.

But despite their seductive appeal, the nerdy little secret of games is that they are intensely mathematical. Games as a form of culture have a unique relationship to math – to systems, structures, and numbers. And so it's no surprise that *Characteristics of Games*, as a detailed study of the form, is intensely analytical.

The question is, can systems be dramatic? Can math be breathtaking? Can numbers move your soul? If you study, or play, or make games with any kind of depth – whether your game is Poker, Basketball, Scrabble, Tetris, or Halo – you already know the answer.

So let this be a warning: playing a game may be an exercise in pleasure, but this book is not easy reading. It is difficult fun, stuffed with hard-won insights that are not laid out on a silver platter for easy consumption. But if you take the time, this book will open your eyes to the beauty of games.

The authors command a formidable expertise in the way games work, and a charming fearlessness for taking on what seem like fools errands. They tackle the minefield of measuring the amount of skill and luck in a game: how would you compare, for example, Chess vs. Poker vs. Roulette – not just in general terms but in specific numerical ratings? Or another: charting the density of choices in a game over time, in order to understand how climax and dénouement take shape in the system of a boardgame, or a real-time strategy game, or an MMO. And they actually make graphs.

Analytical? Certainly. But don't let their logical style fool you. There is a passion beating beneath these chapters. Relentless rigor is their strength, breaking through the numerical surfaces of games to the universes of pleasure swimming underneath.

3.

You may still be asking yourself about the relevance of a book like *Characteristics of Games*. It may have insight, but is it useful beyond communities of expert players, hardcore fans, critics, scholars, or game designers?

To answer, let me take another example: a fundamental phenomena of games that the authors call the Catch-Up. It represents a deep paradox of play: in order to stay engaged, game players need to feel like the possibility exists for them to win, even up until the very end of a game (would you really keep on playing if you knew you were going to lose?). But at the same time players can't feel that only the end of the game matters – they need to sense that their actions have meaning from the very start, that all of their choices accumulate in a way that brings them logically and steadily to a knowable conclusion.

Does this impossible idea – that a game must keep hope alive for a reversal of fortune, even while reassuring players that everything they do has a place in a fixed progression – have relevance outside of game design? Absolutely. This little drama of free will and fate plays out in every game, but it also rears its head in questions of economics and the psychology of choice, in designing behaviors across massive online social networks, and in classical philosophical problems of ethics and responsibility - such as motivating voters to participate in a democracy. Every game is a context for reflection; a laboratory for thinking about thinking.

So, yes, games are relevant to life outside the game – nearly infinitely so. But games shouldn't be thought of as valuable because they are relevant to other fields of research. Above and beyond any definable utility, games are valuable because they are a fundamental form of human expression. Like making music or telling stories, playing games is an activity that connects us more deeply to who we are.

So believe the hype about games, but understand that realizing their potential means setting aside grand visions and glittering surfaces. Instead, just play – spectate, participate, analyze, modify, design. This book is here to help you do just that: play more deeply.

And it's damn hard to argue against putting more play into the world.

Eric Zimmerman
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