Review

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The stuff games are made of
Barr P., MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2023. 184 pp. Type: Book (0262546116)

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Full Text

What do we consider the "stuff" that makes up a video game? Is it interesting gameplay? Compelling graphics? Lifelike effects and fast-paced first-person shooter (FPS)? Deep strategy? Engaging mechanics that don't let you go, that glue you to your favorite gaming device? How simple can a game be without losing its essence as a game? Pippin Barr, in a short and easy-to-read text, approaches these questions in a very novel way, and brings surprising and fresh answers.

The book begins by setting up the narrative of a weird, minimalist video game where the object of the game is to manipulate the top scores--the leaderboard. The author quotes anthropologist Daniel Miller's work as fundamental in choosing the title, which is ambiguous on purpose:

> Don't, just don't, ask for or expect a clear definition of "stuff." ... [Stuff brings] a continued engagement and conversation with its wearer, and a constant pressure to respond to changes in one's surrounding social environment.

Barr presents himself as an experimental video game designer and developer. Throughout the book he presents us with very simple game twists, followed by reflections on what they mean for players and which elements the "player" is played with by the game.

This book is loaded with philosophy. Each of the chapters takes an idea and discusses a mini-game implementing it--as well as players' reactions. It begins with a series of variations on the classic and universally recognized *Pong* video game that bring it to the point of near unplayability, to watching the computer alone play trivial video games enacting ancient Greek mythology. Some video games are about contemplating the world around us: a gallery of different implementations of water-rendering models for the Unity gaming engine. Or just a game about contemplating time passing by, a game to recreate the time--and the experience--of queueing for something we believe to be important. All of Barr's games focus on the player's subjective experience, not on the games themselves, which seem to be tremendously trivial compared to the state of present-day video game development.

The book is quite short. Not only that, I was surprised by how much I enjoyed reading it; however, I should still point out it is a nontechnical book, more for those in the digital humanities than for people interested in the technical aspects of game development. It presents a novel approach.

As for other books covering similar topics, the obvious place to look is MIT's "Playful Thinking" series. (The series started in 2015, and published roughly one book every year. But after the Covid lockdown of 2020-2021, they picked up steam, and as of late 2023, MIT has published 18 books looking at games from different human angles.) In *Uncertainty in games* [1], Costikyan explores how uncertainty in games-- from *Super Mario Bros.* to rock/paper/scissors--engages players and shapes play experiences. In *Works of game* [2], Sharp digs into "game art," treating video games as a form of popular culture from which can be borrowed subject matter, tools, and processes, and brings forward a study about the relationship between games and art. In *The art of failure* [3], Juul explores why we play video games despite the fact that we are almost certain to feel unhappy when we fail at them.

Reviewer: Gunnar Wolf   Review #: CR147667

1) Costikyan, G. *Uncertainty in games*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013.

2) Sharp, J. *Works of game*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

3) Juul, J. *The art of failure*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016.

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Bushnell N. Communications of the ACM 39(9): 31-37, 1996. Type: Article

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