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## 100 Video Games: BFI Screen Guides

by James Newman, Iain Simons

British Film Institute  
January 2008, 272 pages, \$20.95

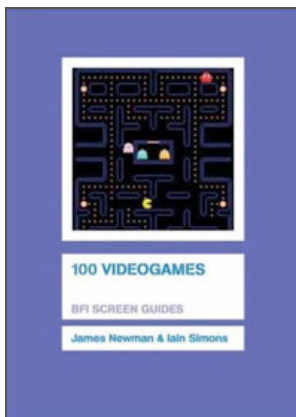
by Kieran Curran

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The introductory paragraph to this cool little book is boldly headed "lists are rubbish!"

Authors Newman & Simons (both British university lecturers interested in analysing gaming within the field of cultural studies) go on to explain that this is not a typical list or similar consumer guide (see the *1,000 Books To Clutter Your Bookshelves And Gather Ample Dust With Before You Die* and *The Most Vitally Seminal Singles From 1978*, et al) but attempts to sketch out a broad, alphabetically ordered collection of significant video games.



*100 Videogames* includes selections ranging from the pioneers of the form at different stages (Pong, Space Invaders, Super Mario Brothers) to more technological innovators (Metal Gear Solid). Others selected represent cultural phenomena – Grand Theft Auto Vice City, for example, not only galvanised the obligatory gaming naysayers for its apparently society crumbling simulations of exaggerated violence but, in its choices of music, tapped into a wider zeitgeist of fascination with '80s nostalgia.

Their style imparts a love of the game as a whole. They are knowledgeable (apt, considering their status in video game academia), and the references they make are broad, covering games over a wide variety of consoles. Pioneering first person shooter Doom on the PC is analysed, the ubiquitous Snake and Minesweeper are given their props as simplistic but infinitely playable, Sega's innovations in the realm of "3D" gameplay are praised, and Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers is rightly lionised. Some obscure gems such as Vib Ribbon – a 1999 Playstation game which eschewed conventionally 'good' graphics for a deliberately scrappy aesthetic – are brought into focus as "revolutionary".

The cultural significance and effect on the gamer is explored somewhat, too - analysing the way that gaming design alters the perceptive capabilities of the player. Their intent is admirable: to open up video games for consideration in a more serious context.

Take for example *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, a 1990 game for the Amiga. It is praised for its cinematic game play, placing the player in a story where his or her narrative wits are tested. Comparing it to Kevin Williamson's fusion of so-called low art with post-modern theory in *Scream*, Newman and Simons go on to discuss the complexity inherent in the game's structure. The potential of the form is highlighted with the praise of its editing, rhythm and referencing of other archetypes, making it "cinematic" of sorts. But it is also literary, referencing Cyrano De Bergerac in a new context just as obliquely as Murakami references Raymond Chandler.

There is a point of view common to other commentators on video games. Steven Johnson advocates a very positive view of their worth in particular (and selected popular culture in general) in his book, *Everything Bad Is Good For You*. He sees the importance of video games in terms of their privileging of form over contents—the repetitiveness and challenge/reward system draws gamers in and causes attentiveness in otherwise concentration deficient people. He criticises the tendency of writers and talking heads to focus on some of the more gratuitous and sensational aspects of gaming.

The caricature of the isolated, solipsistic gamer is attacked as too

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simplistic, being as it is roughly analogous to the far more respected area of book reading. His main criticism of the discourse is as follows: "We rarely hear accurate descriptions about what it actually feels like to spend time in these virtual worlds." The authors seek to redress this imbalance.

Like popular music, video games represent a new area for more insightful and in-depth analysis. In the Mario segment, Newman and Simons refer to its rarefied status as a game loved by the masses and critics alike. This is an interesting insert, as it doesn't seem all that surprising to me. The high/low cultural division comes from the likes of literature, music and film, where a defined Canon exists and critics often uphold this.

Gaming criticism has always seemed to me to be rooted in the primary experience of play. If this sort of writing continues, writers on fiction (remediation!) could learn from the younger form and have less recourse to elites. Of course, the converse could also happen. Let's hope it'll be honest, at least.

**RATING:**  8

— 27 May 2008

Tagged as: [james newman](#), [iain simons](#)

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