Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, Cambridge MA: MIT Press

On a web site reviewing one of his company's game designs, Eric Zimmerman identifies a problem which *Rules of Play* goes a long way to address:

> "Unlike other design fields like architecture and graphic design, game design lacks a critical discourse that bridges theory and practice to help designers better understand games as cultural objects and to help critics and scholars better understand how developers conceptualise the creation of their games. On the academic side, too much writing about games takes place 'over the shoulder' of game players. On the industry side, the medium as a whole is culturally stunted."(1)

Monumental in both ambition and size, *Rules of Play* stakes out a disciplinary space for game design by providing a much-needed vocabulary for talking about games. It does not cover technical production but offers 18 theoretical frameworks to guide design thinking, from games as interactive and logical systems, as contexts for social play and conflict, and as forms of cultural discourse. Although these frameworks are not integrated into one overarching theory but instead offer multiple perspectives, the objects of study are considered as one unified field, with games of all shapes and sizes brought under the same disciplinary umbrella, from board games to computer games, math puzzles to playground games.

Aimed at teachers and students on games design courses, *Rules of Play* is written with textbook clarity. It includes exercises to generate design ideas, comments on the difficulties particular to designing for interactivity and provides tools for identifying and resolving common problems. The scope of its scholarship ensures that it will also be a reference work in the emerging field of game studies. Anyone currently considered relevant is discussed, including the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, anthropologists Johann Huizinga and Roger Caillois, and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The authors aim to strengthen the relationship between games as a field of academic study and games production. By taking the education of games designers beyond craft-based methods, they hope to promote experimentation in the games industry.

In this respect, the book is a manifesto - for a different kind of game designer and new paradigms in game design: "[We] are unapologetic activists for a radical transformation in game design...[because] we have barely tested the limits of what they have the potential to become" (p 605). The final chapters advocate the removal of boundaries between players and designers, leading to new forms of play and the development of games into works of art. How games designers are to put this into practice, however, is unclear. Although *Rules of Play* works brilliantly as an articulation of games design theory, its vision of where design should go next is a little unclear. This is largely because the authors want to keep design separate from development, with design fundamentals somehow transcending the concerns of those who make and sell games. The close relationship between design, production,

marketing, and distribution is ignored, as well as how all of these are paid for. As a result, the authors interpret an apparent dearth of creativity in the games industry as a design issue, rather than one relating to that industry's technology and economy. It also leads them to neglect the instances of production by players that already exist, as well as the contribution of games to a wider media culture.

However, this does not fatally undermine the more general point that games design could evolve in new directions if practitioners explore new paradigms of game play, particularly ones which blur the lines between producers and players, and gaming and real life.

At the heart of the book is the concept of meaningful play. Rules alone do not constitute meaningful play; it emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game: "creating a game means designing a structure that will play out in complex and unpredictable ways, a space of possible action that players explore as they take part in your game" (p 65). Game design involves examining how meaning is created and enriched through individual instances of play. Shaped by players and consequently open-ended, it is best conceived as an iterative process – designs evolve over time and often spawn numerous variations. The authors describe six ways in which the teenage party game 'Spin the Bottle' is played, each one remolding social and sexual relations by sanctioning and forbidding particular play actions.

Although 'meaningful' here relates primarily to the emotional and psychological experience of playing, a couple of sections use semiotics to examine how signs may have one meaning within a game and another outside of it. The word 'jinx' means 'a malevolent force' in everyday talk, but in Scrabble, it can mean over 60 points and a thrashing for your opponent (who admittedly may quibble about the difference). Games are separate from normal life and playing involves consciously interpreting signs according to different rules. This argument is useful in addressing concerns about the real world effects of violence in computer games. It also challenges a common belief that the defining characteristic of computer games is the way they immerse players in an imaginary world, where the frame between the game and the real world ideally falls away. The authors suggest that it is this fallacy which has driven the computer games industry to define innovation in terms of ever greater graphical realism at the expense of more imaginative game play. No matter how accurately the detail of a gun or scenery has been rendered in a game, we never lose sight that it is just that – a game. If we did, we wouldn't be able to play it. Play therefore requires a double consciousness in which the player remains aware of the artificiality of the play situation.

Following an introductory unit defining some of the key concepts in the field, *Rules of Play* is organised into three main sections: Rules, Play and Culture.

The Rules unit focuses on the mathematical structures of games: "the complexity of rules has an intrinsic fascination, the hypnotic allure of elegant mathematics and embedded logic" (p 302). In Matrix-like fashion, Salen and Zimmerman reveal the mathematical permutations behind a wide variety of games, from Chess to Snakes and Ladders, exposing the commonality between them and justifying the book's premise that studying games as a single category of design has benefits. However, by focusing on what games have in common, they sometimes overlook the important ways in

which they differ. In the section on rule breaking, there is some prevarication about whether cheats are degenerate strategists undermining the authority of rules or creative devotees over-eager to deepen the experience of play. It might have been more interesting to examine the range of ethical thresholds in games. Whereas rule breaking in cricket is the very definition of bad form, it is dealt with through established procedures in football (such as penalties) and deployed as one strategy among equal others in many computer games.

The unit on Play widens out the discussion to examine the player experience of the formal design of games. It explores games as systems of experience and pleasure; meaning and narrative play; and simulation and social play. Salen and Zimmerman borrow from Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow to analyse the pleasure of games, arguing that the feeling of total engagement and pervasive sense of pleasure associated with being in a state of flow can be designed for using the notion of same-but-different. Games have a consistent structure but offer a different experience and outcome each time they are played. At the heart of what makes games pleasurable is experiencing the familiar transformed by difference through repetition.

The unit on Culture examines games as contexts for the production of cultural beliefs. There's a fascinating history of Monopoly, which was developed by two Quakers in 1904 as a vehicle for teaching the evils of land monopoly. The contemporary format of the game, in which the aim is to become the wealthiest monopolist, expresses a very different ideology. However, although the authors describe this ideological shift, they do not discuss how the evolution in the game's rules occurred and how the successive versions shaped either the beliefs or the pleasure of players. This is partly a consequence of the way the book is organised conceptually. Games are understood primarily as mathematical structures which contain play and take place against a backdrop of culture: "we understand 'culture' to refer to what exists outside the magic circle of a game, the environment or context within which a game takes place" (p 508). The authors go on to say that games can either reflect or transform culture, but significantly they do not say that games constitute culture. This model makes the relationship between the formal design of rules, play and culture rather problematic. If games are outside culture, how can an evolution in their rules be accounted for in terms of cultural practices, as the authors imply in the case of Monopoly? If it has to be one or the other, should play be interpreted through the lens of culture or rules? Across the book as a whole, there are numerous indications of the authors' belief in a relationship between game design and culture. The boundaries which the book's organisation establishes between rules, play and culture make for a clear structure but in the final unit, it gets the authors' argument into inextricable knots.

The shortcomings of this book do not obscure the Salen and Zimmerman's breadth of vision and learning. They have successfully and rather courageously laid the parameters of games design as a discipline. *Rules of Play* will give rise to many responses and elaborations, and help develop the field further. Salen and Zimmerman's ambitious and imaginative tome has set a high standard for successive research to follow.

References:
Zimmerman, E – quote from www.tnc.net/el/sissy.html