

A CASUAL REVOLUTION

Reinventing Video Games and Their Players

Jesper Juul

**The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England**

© 2010 Jesper Juul

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please email
special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu

This book was set in Scala Serif and Scala Sans on 3B2 by Asco Typesetters, Hong Kong.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Juul, Jesper, 1970–

A casual revolution : reinventing video games and their players / Jesper Juul.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01337-6 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Video games—Psychological aspects. 2. Video gamers—Psychology. I. Title.

GV1469.34.P79J88 2010

794.8—dc22

2009009091

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 A Casual Revolution

Spending the winter of 2006–07 in New York City, I was beginning to lose count of the times I had heard the same story: somebody had taken their new Nintendo Wii video game system home to parents, grandparents, partner, none of whom had *ever expressed any interest whatsoever* in video games, and these non-players of video games had been enthralled by the physical activity of the simple sports games, had enjoyed themselves, and had even asked that the video game be brought along for the next gathering. What was going on?

When I dug a little deeper, it turned out that many of the people I thought were not playing video games in fact had a few games stored away on their hard drives. These were not shooting games or big adventure games, but smaller games—matching tile games, games about running restaurants, games about finding hidden objects in pictures, and, of course, Solitaire. These players did not fit any stereotype of the adolescent male video game player. In fact, they often did not think of themselves as playing video games (even though they clearly were).

The office and holiday parties of that year were also dominated by a new musical game with plastic guitars, and it dawned on me that this was not about video games becoming *cool*, but about video games becoming *normal*. Normal because these new games were not asking players to readjust their busy schedules. Normal because one did not have to spend hours to get anywhere in a game. Normal because the games fit the social contexts in which people were already spending their time, normal because these new games could fulfill the role of a board game, or any party game.

This looked like a seismic change, but when I asked people why they had not played video games before, another pattern emerged. Many of

these people I'd thought were playing video games for the first time would on closer questioning happily admit to having played much earlier video games like *Pac-Man* and *Tetris*, and to having enjoyed them immensely. Hence the bigger picture was not just that video games were finding a new audience, but also that video games were *reconnecting* with an audience that had been lost. Why? The answer: the first video games had been made for a general audience because there was no separate audience of game experts at the time. Between the arcade games of the early 1980s and today, video games have matured as a medium, developed a large set of conventions, grown a specialized audience of fans... and alienated many players.

The casual revolution in the title of this book is a breakthrough moment in the history of video games. This is the moment in which the simplicity of early video games is being rediscovered, while new flexible designs are letting video games fit into the lives of players. Video games are being reinvented, and so is our image of those who play the games. This is the moment when we realize that everybody can be a video game player.

The Pull of Games

As an avid video game player, I have experienced much of the first thirty years of video game history first hand, and it has been disconcerting to see great games ignored by many potential players. Given that video games are as wonderful as they are, why wouldn't you play them? The best way to answer this may be to consider what it feels like to enjoy video games. This experience, of being a *gamer*, can be described as the simple feeling of a *pull*, of looking at a game and wanting to play it. Consider the jigsaw puzzle shown in figure 1.1. In all likelihood you know how you would complete it. You can imagine the satisfaction of moving the final piece, of finishing the puzzle. The jigsaw begs you to complete it.

Or look at the video game shown in figure 1.2. If you have ever played *Pac-Man*,¹ you know your mission is to eat the dots and avoid the ghosts, and from a brief glance at the screen, you may already have planned where you want to go next in the game.

This is the pull of video games, and indeed, of nondigital games too. You can see what you need to do in the game, you can see, more or less, how to do it, and you *want* do to it. In music, or in stories, we experience



Figure 1.1
Complete the puzzle (image ©kowalanka-Fotolia.com)

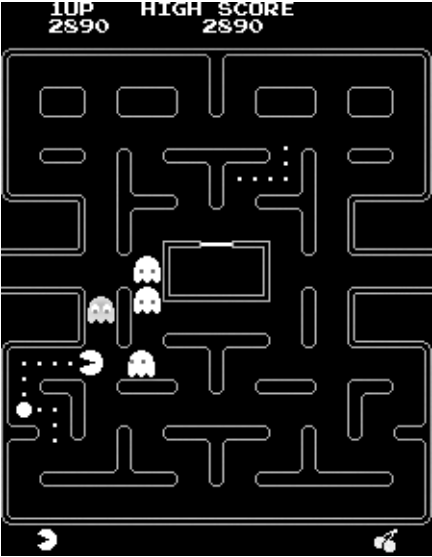


Figure 1.2
Pac-Man (Namco 1980)



Figure 1.3
WarCraft III (Blizzard 2002)

a similar type of pull: When Frank Sinatra sings “*I did it my—*” we want him to end the melody on “*way.*” There is a pull toward the final note of the song, the *tonic* in musical terms. A story’s pull makes us want to know what happens, how the characters deal with the situation, or who committed the crime. These things pull us in. Video games are like stories, like music, like singing a song: you want to finish the song on the final note. You must play this game. You *must*.

Why must you? The video game’s pull is a subjective experience that depends on what games you have played, your personal tastes, and whether you are willing to give the game the time it asks for. For example, who can resist being moved by the invitation of the game shown in figure 1.3? A real-time strategy game is waiting to be played.

Actually, many people do not feel any pull whatsoever toward playing this game. Perhaps *you* do not. The illustrated game, *WarCraft III*,² is not universally loved. While it is fairly certain that you know what a jigsaw puzzle asks of you, and there is a high chance that you know what to do with the game of *Pac-Man*, a modern game like *StarCraft* is divisive. Not everybody feels the pull: not everybody knows what to do, not everybody wants to pick up the game and start playing.

This I have always found perplexing, so this book is the result of my journey toward understanding that mystery of why somebody would choose not to play video games, and why a new audience is *now* starting to play video games. I am going to tell stories of the players and develop-

ers who are part of the casual revolution, and I will show how changing game designs are reaching new players.

By now I do understand why some would not feel that pull. I understand the frustration of not knowing which buttons to push, of being unfamiliar with the conventions on the screen, of being reluctant to invest hours, days, and weeks into playing this game, of being indifferent to the fiction of the game, of having a stupid machine tell you that you have failed, of *being unable to fit a game into your life*.

A Casual Game for Every Occasion

There is a new wave of video games that seem to solve the problem of the missing pull; games that are easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations. I will refer to these new games using the common industry term *casual games*. In this book I am focusing on the two liveliest trends in the casual revolution:

- The first trend is games with *mimetic interfaces*. In such games the physical activity that the player performs mimics the game activity on the screen. Mimetic interface games include those for Nintendo Wii (see figure 1.4), where, for example, playing a tennis video game involves moving your arm as in actual tennis. Other examples include music games such as *Dance Dance Revolution*,³ *Guitar Hero*⁴ (figure 1.5), and *Rock Band*.⁵
- The second trend is known as *downloadable casual games*, which are purchased online, can be played in short time bursts, and generally do not require an intimate knowledge of video game history in order to play. Figure 1.6 shows the downloadable casual game *Cake Mania 3*.⁶

When I refer to these trends I use the term *video games* to describe all digital games, including arcade games and games played on computers, consoles, and cell phones. Video games reach players through a number of different distribution channels. Whereas mimetic interface games are generally console games sold in stores, downloadable casual games are sold on popular websites. While the increasing reach of video games can also be witnessed in the popularity of small, free, browser-based games like *Desktop Tower Defense*,⁷ the focus here is on the commercially more successful mimetic interface and downloadable casual games.

In the short history of video games, casual games are something of a revolution—a cultural reinvention of what a video game can be, a



Figure 1.4
Nintendo Wii players (Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images)



Figure 1.5
Guitar Hero II player (AP/Wide World Photos/D. J. Peters)



Figure 1.6
Cake Mania 3 (Sandlot Games 2008)

reimagining of *who* can be a video game player. A manager from the video game publisher Electronic Arts describes the challenge of creating games for a new audience as a *rewiring* of the company: “I was surprised by how wired we were to a particular target audience of 18–34-year-old guys. It was a challenge to change the rule book of designing games for fraternity brothers.”⁸

The rise of casual games also changes the conditions for creating games targeted at non-casual players. A game designer describes it as “harder and harder to find people willing to fund games that only go after that narrow hardcore audience.”⁹ In other words, the rise of casual games has industry-wide implications and changes the conditions for game developers, pushing developers to make games for a broader audience. The rise of casual games influences the development of other video games as well.

Does this go beyond a few high-profile games? Are video games really reaching out to a broad audience? The answer is yes. The Entertainment

Software Association reports that 65 percent of U.S. households play video games today, and that the average age of a game player is 35 years.¹⁰ In the United Kingdom, a BBC report says that 59 percent of 6- to 65-year olds play one form of video game or another.¹¹ These numbers are growing,¹² and are likely to continue to grow: a recent report shows that a staggering 97 percent of the 12–17 age group in the United States play one form of video games or another.¹³ Not that every single person in the world is playing video games just yet, but we can imagine a future where that would be the case. The simple truth is that in the United States and many Asian and Western countries, there are now more video game players than non-video game players. *To play video games has become the norm; to not play video games has become the exception.*

Games and Players

Simple casual games are more popular than complex hardcore games.¹⁴ Casual games apparently reach new players, and the new players they reach are often called *casual players*. But what is casual? The concepts of casual players and casual games became popular around the year 2000 as contrasts to more traditional video games, now called *hardcore* games, and the hardcore players who play them. Casual players are usually described as entirely different creatures from hardcore players:

There is an identifiable *stereotype of a hardcore player* who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.

The *stereotype of a casual player* is the inverted image of the hardcore player: this player has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.

To what extent do these stereotypes map to actual players? Surprisingly, when studies were carried out, they showed that more than a third of the players of downloadable casual games played nine two-hour game sessions a week.¹⁵ Effectively, it seemed that casual players were not playing in casual ways at all. This raised a question: do casual players even exist? Looking at the games commonly described as casual yields a clue in that these games allow us to have a meaningful play experience within a short time frame, but do not prevent us from spending more time on a game.

More traditional hardcore design, on the other hand, requires a large time commitment in order to have a meaningful experience, but does *not* allow a meaningful experience with a shorter commitment. It then follows that the distinction between hardcore and casual should not be treated as an either/or question or even as a sliding scale, but rather as a number of parameters that can change over time because players change over time. The stereotypical casual player gradually acquires a larger amount of knowledge of video game conventions, effectively making the player more like a stereotypical hardcore player in terms of game knowledge. The stereotypical hardcore player, conversely, may find that he or she has less time to play video games due to growing responsibilities, jobs, and children, and so that player's willingness to make time commitments diminishes over time, effectively pushing the player toward more casual playing habits.

To discuss casual games and casual players, it therefore becomes important to avoid the temptation to choose *between* them. There are two possible starting points:

1. Start with *games*: to examine the design of casual games.
2. Start with *players*: to examine how and why casual players play video games.

On the one hand, given that some players play casual games in what we could hardcore ways, it could be tempting to conclude that a game can be played in any way players desire, and that game design as such can therefore be ignored. On the other hand, many players tell stories of how casual games are the only video games they will play, so it would be futile to ignore the games. In my opinion, the idea of having to choose between players and games is a dead end. Instead I take as my starting point the way games and players *interact with, define, and presuppose each other*. A player is someone who interacts with a game, and a game is something that interacts with a player; players choose or modify a game because they desire the experience they believe the game can give them. Seeing games and players as mutually defined makes it clearer why some people do, or do not, play video games.

Though they were never quite true, conventional prejudices say that all video game players are boys and young men. A common (and also imprecise) assumption about casual games is that they are only played by women over the age of 35.¹⁶ In early descriptions, the women playing

casual games were assumed to play only occasionally and with little time investment. Seeing that this is often not the case, the usefulness of taking gender or age as a starting point for discussing players becomes uncertain.¹⁷ Furthermore, the interviews with game players conducted for this book show that changing life circumstances are major influences on the interviewees' playing habits: reaching adolescence, having children, getting a job, having the children move away from home, and retiring all led to major changes in game-playing habits. The question of how games fit into people's lives is therefore the primary angle in this book.

Many video games ask for a lot in order to be played, so it is not surprising that some people do not play video games. Video games ask for much more than other art forms. They ask for more time and they more concretely require the player to understand the conventions on which they build. A game may or may not fit into a player's life. A game may require hardware the player does not have or does not wish to own, it may build on conventions that the player does not know, require skills the player does not have; it may be too easy for a player or too hard, it may not be in the *taste* of the player. Different games ask different things from players, and different players are not equally willing to give a game what it asks.

Games as well as players can be flexible or inflexible: where a casual game is flexible toward different types of players and uses, a hardcore game makes inflexible and unconditional demands on the skill and commitment of a player. Conversely, where a casual player is inflexible toward doing what a game requires, a hardcore player is flexible toward making whatever commitment a game may demand. This explains the seeming paradox of the casual players making non-casual time commitments: a casual game is sufficiently flexible to be played with a hardcore time commitment, but a hardcore game is too inflexible to be played with a casual time commitment.

Changing Games, Changing Players

Game audiences and game designs co-evolve. The audience learns a new set of conventions, and the next game design can be based on the assumption that the audience knows those conventions, while risking alienating those who do not know them. Where video game developers have

often been criticized for making games “for themselves,” casual game developers are encouraged to make games for an audience they are not necessarily part of. Designing for players with little video game experience places conflicting pressures on game developers between innovating enough to provide an experience the player recognizes as worthwhile, and at the same time building on only well-known conventions in order to reach a broad audience. This does not render innovation impossible, but means that innovation often has to be based on the import of culturally well-known activities—such as tennis or guitar playing.

It would be wrong to say that casual games were inevitable, but in hindsight it is clear that many things paved the way for them. The first decades in the history of video games saw video games mature as a medium and develop an elaborate set of conventions that has made them inaccessible to potential players unwilling to commit the time to learn these conventions. Strategy and action games, for example, use a number of interface conventions to communicate the events in the game, making this information easily accessible to those who know the conventions, but presenting a barrier to players new to them. When video games developed a new expressive and creative language of their own, they also shut out people who did not know that language.¹⁸ That is the big story of the history of video games and the rise of casual games. For casual players, there are many smaller stories to tell.

There is, for example, the story of the person who never played video games, and now with casual games finds video games that he or she enjoys. A casual game player in her fifties told me she had played board games and card games all of her life, but had only started playing casual games, and video games at all, after being introduced to *Zuma* by a friend:

My 75-year-old friend introduced me to *Zuma* and *Collapse*, the predecessor to *Zuma*. It was after I had handed in my thesis, so my brain was completely offline. Then she invited me over for dinner and told me she had something interesting to show me. She also had a computer Mahjong game that was very beautiful and exciting, I really liked that. Later I have begun to buy them myself, because they are not that expensive.¹⁹

Then there is the story of the player who avidly played console and arcade games as child, stopped playing video games as they became more complicated, and returned to them via casual games:

When I was a kid, I played *Pong*. . . . Fast-forward about 20 years. Now I'm married and have children. . . . They, of course, have video game systems. To me, these systems look like Mission Control for NASA, so I never play with them. I can't. There are too many buttons.

I can play Wii games. The controller is instinctive to use. In fact, the WiiMote is actually easier to operate than the remote control for my television. *WiiBowl* requires two buttons: A and B. That's totally my speed. . . . With the advent of a gaming system that doesn't require an advanced degree to operate, I have been able to rediscover the joy I found in those early video games I played as a kid. I've found a way to bond with my own children over something that interests them, and when [my] extended family gets together, we have multigenerational play. It's been a great way for my kids, my spouse and I, and my parents to find common ground.²⁰

There is also the story of the player who grew up with video games and now has a job and children, making it difficult to integrate traditional video games into his or her life, creating a demand for titles that require less time to play. One self-termed "ex-hardcore-now-parent" player describes the situation like this:

That pretty much sums up my situation these days. Snatched moments are far more child friendly than hour-long *Mass Effect* sessions. That doesn't mean I don't like sneaking off upstairs to have a bit of [Xbox] 360 time but I can have a game of *Mario Kart* or *Smash Bros* and it's literally five minutes while my daughter entertains herself. Maybe that is the market that the Wii has tapped into. Not the non-gamer; more the ex-hardcore-now-parent gamer.²¹

My own story intersects the big story of casual games, and is also a story of changing life circumstances: I have a life-long love for video games and I have spent much time trying to convince friends and family to play them. Casual games work so much better for me when I want to introduce new players to the joy of video games than did the complicated games of the 1980s and 1990s. Since I became a full-time academic, my own life circumstances have also been changing. I now have meetings, papers to write, trips to make, and it has become harder to find the long stretches of time required for playing the large, time-intensive video games that I still love. Casual games just fit in better with my life.

One would think that making games that *fit* into people's lives was therefore the single most important problem that the video game industry had been working to solve. But in fact, the industry has spent decades solving an entirely different problem, that of how to create the best *graphics* possible.

The Problem with Graphics

[Microsoft on the Microsoft Xbox 360:] Microsoft Corporate Vice President and Chief XNA (TM) Architect J Allard further outlined the company's vision for the future of entertainment, citing the emergence of an "HD Era" in video games that is fueled by consumer demand for experiences that are always connected, always personalized and always in high-definition.²²

[Sony on the Sony PlayStation 3:] In games, not only will movement of characters and objects be far more refined and realistic, but landscapes and virtual worlds can also be rendered in real-time, thereby elevating the freedom of graphics expression to levels not experienced in the past. Gamers will literally be able to dive into the realistic world seen in large-screen movies and experience the excitement in real-time.²³

Upon entering the lecture hall for the Microsoft keynote at the Game Developers Conference in March 2005, I was handed a blue badge. Other attendees received yellow or black badges, but we did not know what their purpose was. The yearly Game Developers Conference is the place where the platform owners—currently Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo—court developers and try to convince them to develop for *their* console. This was especially pertinent in 2005 since the then-current consoles (PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube) were approaching the end of their lifetimes and developers were waiting for what would happen next. J Allard of Microsoft gave a conference keynote and proclaimed that the upcoming Xbox 360 would herald the coming of the HD era. The name *HD era* derived from the fact that the Xbox 360 would have graphics in *high definition*; it would show more pixels than earlier consoles. The Xbox 360 would also have other features such as the user's ability to connect to friends via the Internet, but *HD* was chosen as the moniker encompassing all of the experiences the console could give. At the end of the presentation, the audience was treated to a short animation showing a blue car, a yellow car, and a black car racing each other. The yellow car won, and the thousand attendees with correspondingly colored badges each won a high-definition television. This was Microsoft's take on what should define the next generation of video game consoles: higher definition graphics, more pixels. Sony was happy to follow suit, declaring that while HD really *was* the future, only the PlayStation 3 would be *true* high definition.²⁴ But not everybody at the conference was buying it. Game designer Greg Costikyan described his reaction like this: "Who was at the



Figure 1.7
Microsoft Xbox 360

Microsoft keynote? I don't know about you but it made my flesh crawl. The HD era? Bigger, louder? Big bucks to be made! Well not by you and me of course. Those budgets and teams ensure the death of innovation."²⁵ This was a good expression of the undercurrent of worry at the 2005 Game Developers Conference: the worry that developers would have to spend more resources creating game graphics, thereby pushing budgets to new heights at the expense of game design innovation.

In the then-upcoming generation of consoles (figures 1.7, 1.8, 1.9), the Nintendo Wii was the only one *not* promoted specifically on better graphics; in fact it did not even *have* the high-definition graphics that Sony and Microsoft were trumpeting. Figure 1.10 illustrates how the Wii is by far the technically weakest console of the generation,²⁶ but is also, as of February 2009, by far the most popular game console of the generation.²⁷ Technical selling points clearly do not drive sales of game consoles today.²⁸



Figure 1.8
Sony PlayStation 3



Figure 1.9
Nintendo Wii (image courtesy of Nintendo America)

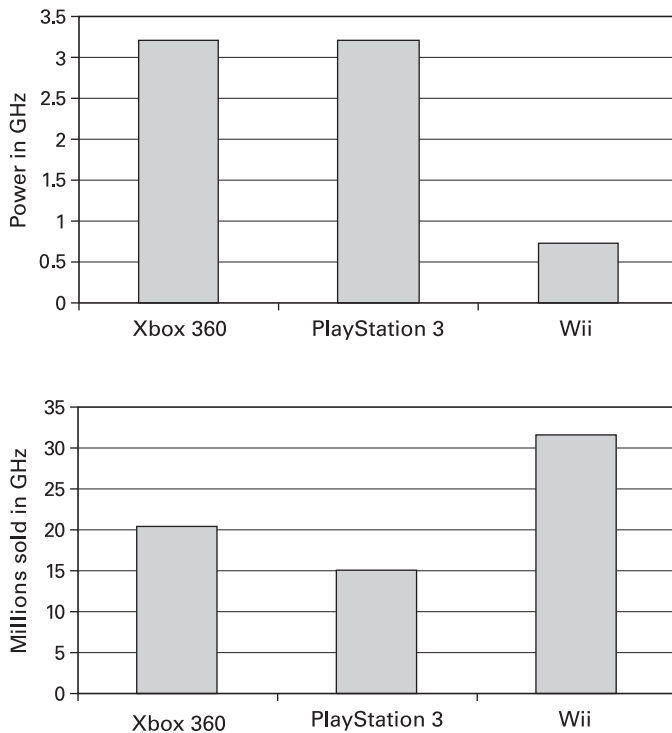


Figure 1.10
Power of game consoles compared to sales by February 2009

If the Wii lags in the graphical department, it does have a new kind of controller and a strategy for reaching a new, market of more casually oriented players. Judging from these numbers, the traditional way of selling new consoles and games via increased graphic fidelity has ceased to work²⁹—or at least is beginning to be outshone by new ways of making games, and by more casual experiences aimed at more casual players.

From 3-D Space to Screen Space to Player Space

The problem with the industry focus on graphics technology is not that graphics are unimportant, but that *three-dimensional* graphics are not necessarily what players want. Casual game design is about making games fit in better with players' available time, but it is also about using space in a different way than one experiences in recent three-dimensional video

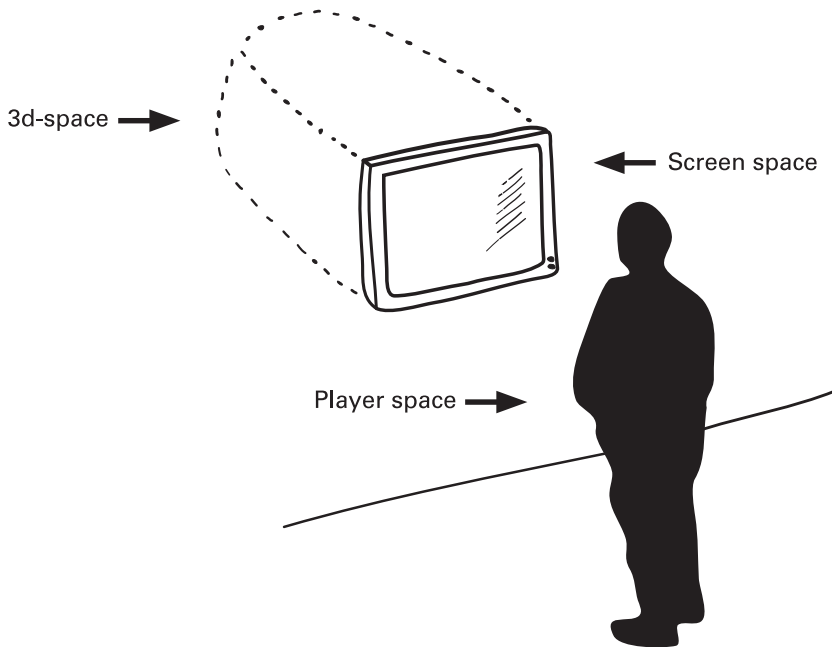


Figure 1.11
3-D space, screen space, player space

games. Figure 1.11 shows how video games can involve three different types of space: whether sitting or standing, the player is situated in the *player space*, the physical space in front of the screen. The screen itself is a flat surface, the *screen space*. Any three-dimensional game presents a world inside the screen, a *3-D space*. (The real world of player space is of course also three-dimensional, but by 3-D space I mean the world projected by the screen.)

Early video games such as *Pac-Man* or *Pong*³⁰ were two-dimensional, but when games like *Wipeout*³¹ (figure 1.12) were published in the early to mid 1990s, the then-amazing graphics looked like the future of video games, heralding that all video games would eventually become three-dimensional. Nevertheless, with casual games the history of video games took a different turn. The 1998 *Dance Dance Revolution* (figure 1.13) shifted the focus from 3-D space to the physical movement of the players on the game's dance pads. The game does feature a display, but most of the game's spectacle is in player space, the real-world area in which



Figure 1.12
Wipeout (Psygnosis 1995)

players move about. Furthermore, the 2004 downloadable casual game *Bejeweled 2 Deluxe*³² (figure 1.14) is two-dimensional just like early arcade games. The movement to screen space and the movement to player space are core aspects of the trends in casual games that I will discuss in this book:

- *Downloadable casual games* are generally two-dimensional games that take place in screen space.
- *Mimetic interface games* are often three-dimensional, but encourage interaction between players in player space, and in such a way that player space and 3-D space appear continuous: when bowling in *Wii Sports*,³³ the game gives the impression that player space continues into the 3-D space of the game.

In short, video games started out as two-dimensional games on screen space, became windows to three-dimensional spaces, and now with casual games we see many games returning to both the two-dimensional screen space and to the concrete, real-world player space of the players. Casual games have a wide appeal because they move away from 3-D spaces, blending more easily with not only the time, but also the space in which we play a game.



Figure 1.13
Dance Dance Revolution player (Mario Tama/Getty Images)



Figure 1.14
Bejeweled 2 Deluxe (PopCap 2004)

Mimetic games move the action to player space, but many of them also encourage short game sessions played in social contexts. Such games, like all multiplayer games, are *socially embeddable*: games for which much of the interesting experience is not explicitly *in* the game, but is something that players add to the game. For example, if playing a competitive match of *Guitar Hero* or *Wii Tennis*, the game takes on meaning from the existing relations between the players. Playing a game against a friend, a significant other, a boss, or a child, adds meaning and special stakes to the game. Furthermore, people playing mimetic interface games are often themselves a spectacle, making these games more interesting even for those who are not playing.

Casual games are new, but new by reaching back in game history and by borrowing liberally from non-video-game activities. Video games are becoming normal; during the history of *all* games, everybody, young and old, has played games of one kind or another. The rise of casual games is the end of that small historical anomaly of the 1980s and 1990s when video games were played by only a small part of the population.

About This Book

This book is meant to capture *what is happening* with video games. In order to do that, I look at the games themselves, at players, and at developers. I will examine the designs of popular casual games, showing the common qualities that make them different from traditional hardcore video games. In order to learn about the habits and opinions of players, I have conducted a survey of two hundred casual game players. I have also made in-depth interviews with a number of game players and game developers.

This book is also meant to fill a void in the rapidly expanding field of video game studies. Most books on video games have tended to be either entirely general (such as Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*³⁴), or focused on specific games (such as T. L. Taylor's *Play between Worlds*³⁵ on *EverQuest*³⁶), or covering specific aspects of all games (such as Mia Consalvo's *Cheating*³⁷). Here I am exploring a middle level of video game studies by looking at the position of casual games in the history of video games and games as such. My feeling is that video game studies must keep improving its tools—tools that must be more than general claims about all games and players, and more than the mere descriptions of single games or players. It is paramount that we can acknowledge player culture without treating games as black boxes, and we must be able to discuss game design without ignoring the players. We must be able to talk about how a single session of a small game is part of the entire history of games. This book constitutes my proposal for how this can be done.

Following this introduction, the rest of the book examines the casual revolution around two questions:

1. How did casual games appear, and how do they relate to the history of video games and nondigital games?
2. How do players and games interact? How do players engage with a given game?

Chapter 2 begins by combining these questions: the terms *casual games* and *casual players* are recent inventions, but they are a response to a time period during which video games became ever more complex and demanded ever more video game knowledge from a player. Casual game design, then, reinvents video games and goes hand in hand with a

reinvention of the video game player. The casual revolution contains a new way for players and games to engage. Casual games share a set of design characteristics that I judge against common conceptions of casual and hardcore players, and show that while actual players are much more varied than can be expressed with the “hardcore” or “casual” categories, casual game design is successful because it is flexible toward different tastes and different usages.

As is often the case, painting a big historical picture makes it easier to perceive the details of what is happening now: chapters 3 and 4 consider casual games in a historical perspective. Chapter 3 shows Solitaire (or Patience) as a proto-casual game that became one of the most popular games played on computers because it was already familiar to players. Solitaire illustrates how a game is always perceived against the background of the games that a player has previously tried, and that the main barrier to playing video games has not been computer technology, but game design.

Chapter 4 focuses on history in a shorter time span: I examine the success of downloadable casual games and review the history of matching tile games. These often simple games evolve only gradually over time, which puts game developers in the treacherous position of having to differentiate themselves from previous games, while still building sufficiently on well-known game conventions that a game is easily accessible to new players. Developers of downloadable casual games borrow generously from earlier games, but they openly try to position themselves as innovative.

Chapter 5, 6, and 7 each tackle the ways in which players and games interact. Chapter 5 examines mimetic interface games, especially *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, and games played on Nintendo Wii, to show that their success is due in part to the fact that they do *not* require players to know video game history, but build on more commonly known activities such as tennis and guitar playing. They are also often social games that move the game action into the space in which players play.

The interstitial chapter 6 explains why games can be social in the first place, by showing how even strategically shallow games like *Parcheesi* are considered social games, and how most of the meaning of such games is brought to the game by the players. Nevertheless, the meaning of a game is facilitated by design: when players can choose among playing to win, playing to keep the game interesting, or playing to manage the social situation, a game quickly become socially meaningful.

Chapter 7 asks why some games, such as *Guitar Hero*, *Sims*, or the *Grand Theft Auto* series are open to many levels of engagement and to being played in many different ways. These games are widely popular because they do not force the player to follow the goal. With this observation, the book returns to the question of history, showing that economical considerations meant that early arcade games *had* to punish players harshly for not reaching the game goal, thereby narrowing the range of available playing styles. Newer large-scale games are meaningful with both small and large time investments because the player is free to not follow the game goals.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by considering the skepticism that many traditional hardcore game players have toward casual games, asking whether game developers have an obligation to make games for people other than themselves, and placing casual games in the history of video games.

Finally, three appendixes document the habits and attitudes of casual game players and developers.

Appendix A contains the results of a survey of players of downloadable casual games.

Appendix B is a collection of player life stories gathered through the survey in appendix A and through additional interviews.

Appendix C contains excerpts from interviews with game developers about their views on the changes in video game design and in video game audiences.