

## The Beauty of Games

Frank Lantz

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Sitting down to read Frank Lantz's *The Beauty of Games* feels like having a cozy, fireside chat with an intellectual speaking simple yet thought-provoking views on his well-studied art form. His words sound intuitive and full of discovery, illuminating new pathways within familiar territory. As the conversation progresses, arguments surrounding the nature of aesthetics, gaming, and our current world break down into smaller, understandable pieces. By the end of a section, each previously unforeseen claim becomes instinctual, falling perfectly into place under Lantz's thoughtful guidance. Lantz pulls examples from a variety of board, card, and video games, finding prototypical examples of games boiled down to their essence. Lantz's arguments unfold over the course of the book, first building ideas of games as aesthetic experiences, then establishing their unique capability to reveal one's models of thinking, and finally advocating for the ability of games to affect the modern world uniquely and positively.

To start, Lantz supposes that games are the aesthetic form of systems by comparing games to other aesthetic forms. In the same way that music turns listening into an aesthetic experience and paintings aestheticize the act of looking, games transform the everyday experience of taking actions and making decisions into an aesthetic experience. Lantz characterizes aesthetic experiences as something that

someone wishes to do, not just "have done." While applicable to some nonaesthetic experiences, this capably connects games with other aesthetic experiences. Through the use of comparisons that resonate, the first chapter succeeds in a difficult challenge of logically proving an aesthetic nature to games.

Having established key ideas around aestheticism, Lantz develops the concept in chapter 2 using examples from classic analogue games: the Chinese traditional game of GO and poker, a staple of American culture. These examples illuminate the way that the games give a player increased self-awareness. For instance, in GO players become progressively aware of their strategies, thought patterns, and the way their actions ripple out into effects on the larger (game) world as they play. Through this process, players gain a new understanding of themselves and their decision making. Separate from the central intellectual argument, this chapter also pulls from Lantz's own experiences, diving deeply into these games in a way that fosters a connection between the reader and writer. Through well-selected examples, Lantz takes games that may appear simple on the surface and finds larger meanings and truths within them.

Games bridge the gap between logical and emotional spaces in chapter 3, aptly titled "Hearts and Minds." Lantz proposes that games inseparably require players to use both aspects of themselves and that this represents a key aspect of the beauty of games. Lantz suggests that instrumental reason—a tool one uses to accomplish a goal logically—constitutes the building blocks of games. The combination of instrumental reason and aesthetics gives

games a unique position, placed within realms of both logic and emotion. They show the beauty in logic and allow one to investigate the relationship between rational and intuitive parts of oneself. Compared to previous chapters, this one introduces more terminology, though it does not lose sight of the approachability that connects a reader with the author.

Lantz concludes by addressing the applicability of his argument to the role games could play in contemporary society. He weighs positive perspectives about the growth games can teach with the potential of games to harm in ways such as encouraging predatory addiction. To support his own optimism, Lantz traces a connection between poker, the drive the game sparked for the development of game theory, and the application of game theory to the possible prevention of nuclear warfare. In short, he advocates for the soft skills games teach system literacy, a crucial aspect of navigating the modern world. His final example beautifully illustrates the way that a game's unprovable impact can potentially still create cultural value in a way that merits attention.

On every page of his book, Lantz's idealism about the potential of games shines through, as he explores their ability to create new connections between one's mind and heart and thereby impact the

world. Infectiously, his words left me feeling good about the time I spend gaming, reflecting on the way I learn systems and develop my decision-making skills while mastering combat systems and making life-or-death decisions. Casual or scholarly readers would benefit from reading this book, and they would enjoy it, too. With an easy-to-follow, logical flow and an openhearted style, the book could act as an entry point for someone wanting to dip their toes in game studies. It is easy to follow. At the same time, it is sharp, and well-read academics will likely still find it offers a new perspective. Play studies scholars seeking to understand how games may connect to their own work could easily pick this up to gain perspective.

*The Beauty of Games* is part of Jesper Juul, Geoffrey Long, William Uricchio, and Mia Consalvo's Playful Thinking series, which strives to stimulate thought through pieces that could be quickly picked up, easily read, and deeply thought upon. On all fronts, Lantz succeeds in these goals. Fundamentally, this book offers tools for anyone playing or studying games to think further about the games they play and the potential of the skills they develop through game play to impact the world.

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—Sabrina Sonner, *University of Oregon, Eugene, OR*