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A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and their Players. Author: Jesper Juul

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REVIEW

Anyone interested in games, gaming and the games industry, whether in the UK or internationally, will be aware of the recent and continuing changes sweeping the market. These changes are turning last generation's market losers into clear winners, and opening new horizons for alternative development and distribution models. New demographics are turning to gaming and old ones are gaming differently and, the economic downturn aside, there is evidence of hugely shifting markets and equally shifting priorities everywhere as the casual game phenomenon spreads like wildfire across the globe.

It is unsurprising then that long held beliefs can no longer be taken for granted. Both academics and industry personnel are asking questions about who gamers are, and therefore what games are, and which features can be described as casual (i.e. those traditionally assumed as appealing to inexperienced or non-committed player markets) or hardcore (i.e. those traditionally aimed at the more experienced markets of highly engaged and skilled players), and what gamers actually want. Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution* offers at least some of the answers.

Providing a clear differentiation between casual games and casual gamers, Juul sheds some light on the subject, giving a healthy overview of the history of casual games before digging deeper into the mechanics of casual features and how they differ from traditional 'hardcore' game-play mechanics. All this is accomplished in an accessible style that will appeal to the academic, the developer and the intelligent enthusiast alike. Juul has a solid grasp of the games industry and the market drivers that affect it. This is informed by a large number of interviews with industry personnel from a wide range of companies and studios.



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Many of the casual games giants are represented, including [PopCap](#) and [Big Fish](#). On the fence, spanning the divide between casual and hardcore there is useful information and informed opinion from [Harmonix](#) and [EA/Maxis](#), among many others. Not all of the big players of the last eighteen months are present, however, with little mention of the rise of the social game powered by *Facebook*, and the omission of any input from giants such as [Zynga](#) (the interview with Dave Rohrl focuses on his time at *PopCap*) and [PlayFish](#) where it would have been expected. Similarly, there is little information on *Nintendo* regarding their hugely successful *DS* console (although the *Wii* is mentioned frequently) and again, nothing from *Apple* on the huge *iPhone Appstore* games marketplace. The global credit crisis and its effect on the games market doesn't feature either and this makes much of the industry and market side of the book feel outdated: This is a book about 2008 and not the rapidly evolving world of casual games in 2010.

Where *A Casual Revolution* really shines, however, is in the academic deconstruction and explanation of casual gamers, their gaming habits and their preferences for certain themes and mechanics. As a recent convert from hardcore to more casual games, I couldn't always agree with Juul's interpretation of the data, or his insistence of using the phrase 'juicy' to describe games with high levels of sensual feedback. He does, however, explain the differences between casual games and casual gaming habits with exceptional clarity. This is especially important given the current changes in monetization models affecting the games industry world-wide, and the explosion of new motion control systems, which promise accessible play to much wider markets than ever before.

Several chapters are dedicated to exploring the concepts of casual gaming in detail, and this is where many of the key findings are explained in such wonderfully succinct and simple visual formats that one wonders why the industry hasn't worked all of this out years ago. In particular Juul's separation of game knowledge, time investment and attitude toward difficulty are highly successful in helping to define the differences between gaming casually and being a casual gamer. This is powerful stuff and will no doubt be influential to any game developer, be it of casual or hardcore games, who reads it.

When it comes to the subject of women in games, you might expect this to be a recurring theme within the book as the high number of women playing casual titles is an oft-repeated claim within the industry and games press. Gender bias as a specific subset of casual – or non-casual – games and gamers is, however, for the most part ignored. While Juul does quote extensively from interviews with women who have discovered gaming via the casual game route (and there is plenty of great reference material in the appendices), they are not singled out and there is a sense that this book refuses to be drawn into the gender debate. Instead the focus is entirely on play styles, subject preference and tolerance for difficulty. As such I found this a refreshing relief from the tub-thumping of casual games being the mainstay of the female market, and was pleased to see that the concept of casual games can in some ways be gender blind.

In terms of format this edition is a pleasingly small and portable hardback that is only marginally larger than a *Nintendo DSi XL* and seems to fit perfectly with its subject matter. In *A Casual Revolution*, Juul also manages to practice what he preaches. The 256 page book is divided into eight clear chapters – pushing all of my geek buttons with its power-of-two compliance - each containing a number of

easily digested bite-sized subsections with plenty of visual aids to appease the casual and hardcore reader alike.

In summary, I would recommend *A Casual Revolution* for anyone currently working in the games industry or who plans to do so in the future, to any academic either interested in gaming history and how it is developing or thinking of embarking on their own research into casual gamers and game mechanics, and to any casual reader with a liking for popular science books and games.