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All the Faces of Agency in Video Games

Bódi, Bettina. Videogames and Agency. Routledge, 2023. pp. 215.

The production of books in the field of video games has been spreading in numerous areas of study in the last several years. In the humanities, the increased interest of leading global publishers in publishing editions that introduce multidisciplinary frameworks for approaching video games reflects this diversity. Examples include the De Gruyter Oldenbourg series Video Games and the Humanities (comprising fifteen volumes) and Routledge Advances in Game Studies (consisting of twenty-six titles), supporting an open access policy for some of the books. Apart from the fact that video games are still a current and wide area of study, the reason for academic interest and the publishing of books in this area is also methodological – video game studies use multidisciplinary interactions between various areas of theory and games while demonstrating how video games fit and influence the existing theoretical and methodological models in the humanities.

It is in this context that we have an interesting example: Bettina Bódi's Videogames and Agency (Routledge, 2023). In the book, the author explores the concept and different kinds of agency in detail, as well as its application to the production context, design, and player agency, using paratextual and textual analysis. The author attempts to find the answer to how and why games enable and limit agency.

Bódi considers various "traditions" and approaches to the study and analysis of video games, presents the recent theoretical work of numerous current theorists of video game studies, which involve narratological approaches that focus on the player's abilities and activities in alternating the storyline, and also draws connections between agency and mechanics, platforms, and material aspects of video games.

eISSN 1847-7755; doi: 10.15291/sic/3.13.lc.5

The theorization of the term agency is analyzed in detail and with great care, differentiating it from interactivity and starting from Jenet Murray's definition of agency as the "power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (qtd. in Bódi 16). Bódi notes the limitation of the definition as regards video game narrativity and expands it to the multidimensional conceptualization of the term.

Regarding the methodology, the author chooses textual (to determine how textual agency is designed) and paratextual analysis (to show how designers discuss the way a game is designed) (Bódi 207). Textual analysis in the book relates to the understanding of games as text, whereby the author considers the terms used by other theorists, such as 'action analysis,' 'close playing,' etc. Bódi further choses the analysis of paratext of video games, starting with seminal works on paratexts by Gérard Genette Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree (1982/1997) and Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (1987/1997) and complementing its application to video games with Mia Consalvo's argument that paratexts shape gameplay experiences "regardless of the actual game itself" (qtd. in Bódi 4).

In this book, video game paratexts include journalistic coverage, texts from conventions and other events, marketing and advertising, trailers, developer texts, websites, blogs, forums, and social media accounts of games, studios, publishers, individual developers, and other participants in the production and distribution of video games. Bódi uses paratext as a tool for gaining insight into the developers' design ethos as the character of the community and the individual in the process of game production, their ideology and professional and artistic identity. The developers' ethos, for Bódi, explains the choice of case studies (series of games, franchises, indie games, standalone titles).

Finally, the author directs the scope of study to avatar-based games since they provide the best view into the shaping of agency due to the mediation of the player's actions with the game's character. Bódi considers the ludic or representational functions of the avatar in the game and how both of these functions influence agency. The avatar's treatment in the case study is represented by the fact that the author uses the "player/avatar" combination almost regularly in the text, showing that the avatar is considered the player's representative in the game, or rather that the

given analysis treats agency equally related to the instance of the avatar and player, which become interchangeable categories.

The five chapters of Bódi's book are devised so that the first two chapters present a theoretical framework, and the next three cover case studies engaging in the presented theoretical framework.

The first chapter, "Understanding Agency," brings an overview of the game studies literature, of the term 'agency' in games, and of the changes in the understanding of the term over the course of game studies' development. The author separates this term from interactivity and takes into account other theoretical considerations and terms, i.e., 'nontrivial effort' (Aarseth), 'player effort' (Juul), 'configurative action' (Eskelinen, Cybertext; "The Gaming"), 'player performance/playformance' (Frasca), also having in mind the curious field of emergent gameplay in this context (Bódi 15). At the same time, she gives a comprehensive and valuable overview of the works in this area (subchapters: "Agency in Game Studies," "Agency in Game Design," and "Toward a Conceptualization of Agency"), including the most recently published works of the eminent authors of game studies and across disciplines. The conclusions regarding these characteristics of agency are given as the titles of sections in the final subchapter ("Agency Is Meaningful Player Choice," "Agency Is Player/Avatar Action," "Agency Is Afforded by Design," "Agency is Designed," "Agency is Possibility Space").

In the second chapter, "A Multidimensional Heuristic Framework for Analyzing Player Agency," Bódi presents her concept of agency as a 'possibility space' for avatar action and shows four dimensions of agency in which in-game action can be most prominently realized:

1. agency afforded in space: the spatial-explorative dimension,

2. agency afforded in time: the temporal-ergodic dimension,

3. agency over the avatar and its surroundings: the configurative-constructive dimension,

4. agency and narrativity: narrative-dramatic dimension. (43-58)

Chapters three, four and five are dedicated to the case studies of avatar-based games and examine how the dimensions of agency support and undermine each other, and also explore how the presented framework "works" in individual contexts. As Bódi points out, the case studies present three dimensions video games can offer: spectacle, role-play, and free play, or the

“gradual relaxation of designer control on player action: from highly linear, through open world, to sandbox” (210).

In the third chapter, Naughty Dog’s Indiana-Jonesian action-adventure game Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End (2016) is analyzed as an example of a fairly standard video game production environment with a very high degree of designer control over player action and progression through the game, as well as a case of cinematic design in games. While noting that “the franchise’s brand identity remains relatively intact over the years” (5), Bódi presents a detailed and interesting description of studio and franchise history, the inception of individual games within its frame and the relationship between agency and occurrences she calls ‘active cinematic experience’ and ‘cinematic feel.’ As the most prominent agency-related elements in the game, the author detects agency in the spatial-explorative, temporal-ergodic, and narrative-dramatic dimensions. Per Bódi’s observations, configurative-constructive agency is marginalized due to the maintaining of story world consistency.

A counterexample to the aforementioned game is BioWare’s sci-fi action role-playing game Mass Effect: Andromeda (2017) analyzed in chapter four: “‘A Compelling Story with Choices That Matter’: BioWare’s Mass Effect Series.” For this game, the author provides a historical overview of franchise development as well, and explores how the individual game fits into it, the process of game development, and general themes in design intentions, corroborating them with developers’ statements, particularly when it comes to game mechanics. This is followed by an examination of the multidimensional frame of agency. Regarding this case study, Bódi argues that both the design ethos of the studio and the brand identity of the franchise changed over the years and states that this was caused by the broader changes in the development and leadership teams, publishers, production, and technologies used.

While the previous two chapters were dedicated to AAA games, the fifth chapter analyses an indie production, System Era’s sandbox survival crafting game Astroneer (2019). The significant thing in this chapter is the consideration of definitions and trends in independent games, as well as the definition of independence in the gaming field. The author adopts a well-established framework, starting a chapter with the brief history and circumstances of the game's development, adding the examination of its audience/players, which is inevitable when it comes to indie games. The

analyzed paratext starts from the launch of the early access version of Astroneer in order to follow the developers' plans and intentions. Also, the author points out the characteristic of mechanics in indie games as free, experimental, and creative, arguing that dramatic agency is inherently playful (162, 195) leading to the Caillois' concept of 'paidic play' (1961).

Although Bódi's book seemingly covers a relatively narrow topic, and the case studies nominally include only three games, the book is significant and attention-worthy for game researchers, gamers, students, and people involved in the game production process for multiple reasons. It questions agency from a dual perspective: the players' position and how those who make games think about it (game design discourses). Establishing the division between different kinds of agency, it also investigates how dimensions support or obstruct each other, giving a more detailed insight into its analytical model.

By including paratext analysis in the analytical and methodological framework, the author also provides a significant overview of the manner in which developers view their games and talk about them, as well as how agency is conceptualized in different discourses surrounding video games. Also, the book indirectly touches upon many topics, such as how players' actions and narratively relevant content can be shaped, conceptualization of players' freedom and playfulness, design features such as avatar attribute systems, in-game economies, etc.

The book provides a significant overview of games belonging to different genres – from AAA market action-adventures to platforms, shooters, RPGs, open world, sandbox survival crafting games, etc. – and follows the evolution and changes in game design over the past two decades; the final list of games mentioned in the book has eighty-eight titles. In addition, the text is easily tracked due to the notes and reference lists provided for each chapter individually, somewhat shaping chapters as stand-alone units.

A seemingly loose analytical and methodological model, covering a theoretical perspective, which entails both narratological and ludological perspectives of the term agency, crossed with the consideration of paratext (external approach) and gaming perspective – the textual analysis of games themselves (internal approach), profiled toward avatar-based games from AAA to indie titles, has given a positive result in the form of a book that provides much more information than its title announces. Bódi's book also opens new questions regarding agency, such as the

manifestation of dimensions of agency in different forms of media, the study of augmented and virtual reality, multiplayer (and) online games, and cultural politics in terms of communication and social interaction.

This is why this book is worth the attention as a theoretical overview focused on a single topic that encompasses many other issues of video game study. It is an example of building a new analytical and theoretical framework and valuable case studies, representing an insight into future tendencies and possibilities of video game studies.

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