

## Book Review

**Sebastian Domsch.** *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games.*

Narrating Futures 4. Berlin/Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2013, 190 pp., 1 table,

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Sebastian Domsch's *Storyplaying* is part of de Gruyter's series 'Narrating Futures', positioned, as the opening pages make clear, as a companion piece to Christoph Bode's *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (2013). In applying Bode's medium-independent considerations to digital games, Domsch's main interest appears to lie with theory formation, which he supports with examples drawn from over 100 digital games. The 180 pages of the main argument are divided into seven chapters. The introduction defines the titular key term of 'storyplaying' and situates it in both a media-technological and media-historical perspective. Chapter two goes in more depth with theoretical ground work on "Video Games and Narrative", mostly distinguishing between different narrative forms frequently encountered in digital games. Chapters three and four approach the problem of narrative in digital games from opposing trajectories, 'Non-Unilinear Gameplay' and 'Non-Unilinear Narrative' respectively, inquiring into the consequences of nonlinearity for game structures and narrative structures. Chapter five focuses on choice as a constitutive element of narrative in digital games, which is expanded upon in chapter six by exploring the moral dimension of decision-making in games as a valorizing of both rules and morality. The last chapter extrapolates, by way of a conclusion, the future of storyplaying, envisioning "games (unthinkable as they seem to be in the current climate) that make us want to achieve something, but then force us to accept that this something is not achievable, or is not as desirous as was first expected" (180).

This penultimate sentence of the book showcases at least three of its main problems: it has not aged well, is inconsistent, and it is sometimes imprecise. With a field that is progressing as fast as game studies, the four years that have elapsed since the book's publication are a rather long time, and concurrent and newer research calls many of Domsch's assumptions into question. Equally, the "unthinkable" unwinnable game is quite wide-spread by now, which it already was at the time of Domsch's writing. Domsch discusses several examples of this kind of game himself, mostly when dealing with limited or distorted information

in digital games, without making this connection. Among those examples is *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* (2007), a game which has two possible endings, both of which are undesirable: sacrifice all friends of the protagonist, or accept a life-threatening injury to the protagonist's daughter, who in any case becomes estranged from her father. Not only does the book overlook this expression of the state of the art, it is imprecise in discussing the game.<sup>1</sup>

I raise these issues (which I will illustrate in more detail) so directly and early not out of pettiness, but to illustrate the difficulty of reviewing the book. It is written as a part of a developing approach in narratology and as such foregrounds the storytelling aspects of digital games, and it tries to instill this view of the medium (which can be traced back to the very first dissertation on games, Mary-Ann Buckles *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure* [1985]), with some fresh perspectives. This is laudable, and the book's structure, its main consideration, as well as its delimitation and selection of examples are sound. However, the countless little issues make it very difficult to engage with the overarching argument.

The book's integration of the concept of Future Narratives creates another, more general hurdle for readers. While it is understandable that there is little critical discussion of the concept of Future Narratives, some more exposure of the concept and a stronger contextualization with comparable approaches would have been immensely helpful. The strong reliance on Christoph Bode's theories also means that much of Domsch's argument cannot be discussed on its own, and constructing the dependences between the two books is beyond the scope of this review.

Similarly, Domsch's strongly literary view of digital games rather bears mentioning than discussing. The player is conceived of primarily as a reader, who is "therefore 'playing' the story to a much larger extent than in any other medium" (3). Thus, the player is seen as someone who engages with a narrative artefact of playful character, not as someone who primarily plays a game that has a narrative dimension – a fine distinction that Domsch himself mentions as important, yet then ignores. Despite efforts to the contrary, game system, game world, and fiction are handled as quasi-identical (18–19).

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<sup>1</sup> Domsch uses the game as an example of unreliable information, describing a situation in which the player character suffers from a delusion that lets him perceive hostages of a bank robbery as attackers, inciting the player to shoot these innocents (136). While this is a part of the game, it only features in the cooperative mode of the game, where the two titular characters are controlled by one player each. This is not thematized and runs counter to the study's delimitation to single-player games (10).

The definition of the field of analysis is plagued by similar problems. Instead of pragmatically limiting the analysis to a subset of digital games (identified by other scholars previously as game-narrative hybrids, storygames, avatar games etc.), Domsch attempts to define (digital) games in general, which leads to categorical problems in dealing with multiplayer-games and forces him to proclaim a number of normative simplifications about what qualifies as playing a game and what does not (27). The book treats media in a similar way and, with little recourse to the overwhelming wealth of literature on the topic, establishes its own model of medial forms that hinges on the idea of a ‘correct’ use of media. This notion (also apostrophized by Domsch) is already contentious when applied to e.g. the novel, but when applied to games, it is diametrically opposed to the freedom of play, and it unequivocally equates adherence to rules as correct play, which is one of the aforementioned untenable positions of the argument.<sup>2</sup> By understanding rules of games as a prescription of “proper use” (9), the game system becomes absolute and idealized. The resulting role of the player as an implicit element of the game’s structure is not problematized or grounded in theory (like that of the implied player); instead, the player’s ability to exert agency on the narrative is regularly stressed and taken for granted as something that is controlled by games that “have developed rules to limit the freedom of agency” (11).

Understanding games coherently as produced by rules is, of course, completely legitimate. The problems of Domsch’s book arise from a very broad understanding of the term ‘rule’ – which is taken to encompass social conventions of the physical world, laws of physics, simulated physics, in-game affordances, adaptive difficulty systems (17) – and imprecise handling: describing adaptive difficulty system as ‘dynamic rule structures’ is misleading because such systems have rigid structures within which the values of some parameters are continuously adjusted. This category mistake seems especially grave given the focus on the nodal principle in *Future Narratives*, where the distinction between the structure and element is crucial.

One of the biggest issues I take with the book, however, is its use of canonical theory. This is not one of the publications that somehow makes it through the review process without referring to the relevant theories; a great deal of what one would expect to find is present in the bibliography. Yet the way the established theories are used is puzzling. One particularly prominent example is Aarseth’s

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<sup>2</sup> Many games researchers have explored the freedom of play and its tenuous relationship to extra-ludic social contracts (among them David Myers [2010] and Mia Consalvo), yet the central points of the discussion can be found in Sicart (2011).

theory of cybertexts and ergodic literature (1997). While Domsch touches upon concepts from ~~what~~ Aarseth's landmark in understanding non-linear narratives, it does so in an offhand manner and avoids, to its own detriment, any deeper critical engagement with the earlier theory. Aarseth's straightforward distinction between 'textons' and 'scriptons' gets no mention in the discussion of the constitutive properties of digital media, and is first brought up in a footnote to Domsch's own typology, saying little more about it than that the author felt it was unintuitive (48).<sup>3</sup> In general, the book tends to offer its own categories over established ones without engaging with the state of the art. When discussing different types of rules, Jesper Juul and Roger Caillois are mentioned in passing (with the latter's term '*paidia*' consequently spelled '*paidea*'); in another place, "four basic types of information that are provided by a video game" (25–26) are defined without any engagement with existing typologies, and no definition of vague key terms like 'text' (which, in this context, could refer to natural language, written language, or a semiotic arrangement).

Even where interesting concepts are introduced, they tend to be underdeveloped or exemplified inopportunistly. Locating the narrative potential of digital games in a "semantic surplus" (18) is promising, yet the chosen example actually undermines the argument Domsch is trying to make: The painstaking rendering of facial expressions in *L.A. Noire* (2011) is a part of the game's feedback loop, not a surplus. The minute detail of character's faces is an essential indication of the game state, the basis for the player's actions just as much as the position of pieces on the chessboard. The game surely has many elements that are not motivated by core game elements – the to-scale rendition of Los Angeles, the black-and-white visuals of flashback sequences etc. – but the rendition of its virtual actors most definitely is. Here, the normative notions of what 'a game' is stand in the way of the argument: "Though from a game design perspective, we can still easily tell apart the gameplay structure ('in the first encounter, the first option will lead to state a and the second to state b') from its semantic presentation ('the first case is about a murder'), *L.A. Noire* is simply unplayable as only a game" (21).

What makes the book truly frustrating at times is that these terminological and argumentative issues even extend to the parts that deal with the novel and film. In some instances, these can be considered highly controversial (and thus potentially productive) positions, such as: "A 'perfect transcript' of the *experience* of reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman* would be in form identical to the text

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<sup>3</sup> Aarseth is ignored even more poignantly when Domsch discusses the different functions of doors in games without mention of Aarseth's "Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games" (2007).

of that novel” (49, my emphasis). In others, terminology is simply used wrong, e.g. when it says that a “cut-scene [...] completely aligns play time and diegetic time – it will take the player always exactly the same amount of time to watch the cut scene [sic!]” (34). Apart from the inconsistent spelling of ‘cut-scene’, the passage confuses diegetic time (the time that passes in the diegesis, i.e. narrated time) with narrative time, ignoring the eponymous ability of these scenes to manipulate time through prolepses, analepses, ellipses etc.

A critical review like this always runs the risk of seeming disgruntled or even aggressive, expressing a disagreement between schools or approaches, instead of a serious engagement with an argument. This is definitely not the case here: I would love to engage with Domsch’s overarching thoughts on narrative and games, yet found myself distracted and irritated throughout by the book’s shortcomings. Experts in the field are thus kept from a productive discussion of the book’s main points, and interested scholars from fields such as literature as well as students will not benefit from its unique ideas and might be better served with more general introductory literature that focuses on the specifics of digital games instead of those of Future Narratives.

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