



THE PERFORMANCE OF VIDEO GAMES: ENACTING IDENTITY, HISTORY AND CULTURE THROUGH PLAY

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The book explores digital games through the lens of theatre and performance theories. The author approaches the problematic from the perspective that digital technologies allow the building of virtual bodies not only for entertainment but to enable alternative ways of communication and self-expression. This comes from posthumanism theories where our bodies are mere extensions of objective bodies, which enables gamers to undergo embodied experiences as actors on the stage.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each of which promises to analyze an independent segment – building the identity of the hero (legend); approaches to building identity through games; a posthumanist approach to games; the functioning of memories and the genre of alternative history through the construction of prequels within game series; exploring history through games, and in the last two chapters the author returns to performance, but through fandom. All these starting points are also the basis for confirming the digital game as a postmodern text.

The topic in and of itself is very beneficial. The ways in which we identify with the avatar, how the players are involved in the story, how it shapes them – culturally and mentally – all this is applicable to many scientific branches connected to digital games. Feminism deals with this topic from the perspective of gender and identity development through avatars and empathic reading possibilities, thus promoting understanding between genders. At the same time, it is essential in order to advance the breaking down of gender stereotypes. The theme of cultural, historical, and personal development through games should equally be a priority for the creators themselves – whether in terms of story or design, as it is confirmed that games have an impact outside the closed world of the game. In the same way, play as a postmodern text is already an established idea in scientific circles. However, the specifics that arise due to the rapid development of this medium must be constantly reviewed.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that in this respect the book puts games on a pedestal and underrates other media in terms of immersion, narrative and how they work with the recipient. On the one hand, the author works with theatre theories, on the other hand, she does not perceive the effect of film and literature on the recipient as strongly as that of digital games. The text defends this claim through the large number of decisions the player must make during gameplay. Chapter two highlights that the story is not pre-created but is created while playing the game. From this point of view, the personality of the character is not defined in advance but is created and changed during the entire gameplay – through cutscenes and player actions. Despite the author's point of view, which thus supports the uniqueness of games, it is difficult to see the difference from that which new cognitive literary sciences claim. Literary theory has moved away from authorship and is more inclined to the fact that the story is created only in the reader's mind. The text itself, just like in games, is not clearly defined, its versions are created during

the reading of the book, the reader's interpretation, through their identification with the character and deduction of the plot. Caracciolo's and Kukkonen's works on comics realize how reading comics involves three layers of reading and interpretation – text, visual and one which takes place at the level of the body (characters' body language as well as readers own biological reactions to the text through accelerated heart rate, sweating and chills, memories, experiences) (Caracciolo & Kukkonen, 2021; Kukkonen, 2013). It must be remembered that Cortázar's (2018) postmodern experiments, or poetic experiments of other postmodern authors where the reader must write sentences, skip passages and read the text according to certain keys have brought literature and games together. The work of the authors of *OuLiPo* and literary and games scholars such as Aarseth (1997), opened the doors to why it is even possible to study plays through the methodologies of theatre and literature.

From the established point of view, we could ask what impact the game would have if it was watched only in the form of a video recording? What happens to the game when it is mediated by a streamer in the form of let's play or playthrough on social platforms? If we were to define it from the perspective of the author of the book under review, this effect might be lost. "But the game world, we can imagine, continues on without us; to experience it, then we must play on" (p. 32). On the other hand, the author highlights the enjoyment that arises only when watching theatre. Another contradiction is in the author's praising the ability of games to provide meaningful choices, yet at the same time she argues that "in a first-person shooter, a player does not usually view the fight in order to determine which side is right and which is wrong. ... The gamer does not [necessarily] ask any question about what they are doing" (p. 52). While highlighting the ability of games to help with self-identifying and difficult decision-making, the paragraph questions the players ability to think critically.

Similar contradictions make the arguments in the book unclear. This is best seen with the choice of research material. The author states in the introduction that she wants to focus on FPS games because these games serve as the best example, among other things, of what audiences are built around them. At the same time, the FPS genre is demanding enough that the player must go through experience growth: "Failure is part of the experience of video games, as the confusion and frustration at game mechanics" (p. 47). So, fear, frustration and failure are part of the experience through which identity is built and new memories are made. This selection should stand in opposition to the emerging canon, without specifying exactly what to imagine under said *canon*. This also raises another question, whether something like a game canon will ever exist. However, the selection of game titles ultimately does not correspond to one particular genre. Throughout the text we can find examples from the aforementioned FPS, through RPGS and action-adventure games all the way to independent games that in many ways defy any clear genre classification. As the author states:

I will analyze key titles from the past two decades (to move away from previously established 'classics' of the form and privilege gaming of more recent years). I recognized that this may mean that some of the case studies may seem arbitrary an organized principle was 'games that I have enjoyed,' as a consumer of media. (p. 4)

This subjective selection is later reflected in the division of the chapters. Although they are clearly formally separated, they overlap in presented ideas. As an example, we can point out the section on alternative history and the ways in which alternative history stories work, where the way the player's identity is formed is also discussed using the example of *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020). It might seem that the overlapping of individual topics that the book wants to grasp is intentional, because they are inseparable from each other. That, however, results in the text seeming unclear until

the conclusion at the end of each chapter. However, the research chapters only indicate a certain issue, and the readers must often find out the results themselves.

In conclusion, each chapter has the potential to be extended into a separate book through case studies – with more examples and theoretical groundwork. In its current form the book is more suitable for people whose focus may cross over to/from digital games and would like to broaden their horizons. If the author will return to the plethora of topics started in the book and expand on them further, the text could serve as the basis for a series of beneficial research.

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