game environments

global network player authority PewDiePie guild god Let's Play angel undead wtf authentic mediatization dungeon Skill PVP contest
game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon race body fight hope spelling games FPS discussion digital
religion gamer analysis representation the healing lore religio-scape Soul diablo class tradition experience witch rebirth genesis clan wedding gamer
simulation lol ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes ritual virtual identity buff priest mage XBox 360 PVE
narrative immersion community symbols salvation
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Analyzing Digital Fiction: A Review

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Abstract

Book review about the book *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (Bell, Ensslin, Rustad, 2013).

Keywords: perspective, narratives, communication, Checkov's Gun, digital fiction

Analyzing Digital Fiction aims to provide scholars and students alike with an accessible overview and hands-on-analysis in the scholarship of digital fiction. The volume is divided into three main parts, containing three to four balanced chapters focusing on narratological, theory of play and social media, and semiotic and rhetoric approaches. It contains the editors´ introduction and ten chapters from scholars of media, literature, cultural studies, communications, linguistics and IT, and an afterword. The volume affords space almost equally to the approaches and engages with the analytical component for digital culture studies. Games and game worlds are analysed in three chapters. The seven chapters looks digital fiction from variety of perspectives; narrative, style, audio-visuality, communications and semiotic approaches.

It is often stated that digital fiction, that has roots in the computing and personal media technological development from last decades of 20th century until today, is revolutionary in the terms of artistic production, reproduction and thus, reception of digital literature. It is also claimed that digital fiction differs from the literary and visual cultural products, printed books, images, film and video games. In the production of digital fiction these elements however, are central to textual

consistency, a convention where a reader subsume the text in certain contexts (Ryan, 2012). In the volume at hand, the majority of the writers carry the main theme. It is the multivocality and contrapunct in the voices that makes this volume interesting.

The importance of this volume lies on the work that establish for the first time the analytical and conceptual tool box to approach the digital fiction. The approach benefits both theoretical and analytical purposes and underlines the fact that the theoretical framework and analytical method are deeply related to the analytical constructions of the researcher. While many of the chapters rely on literature theory and close reading, in-depth analysis and concept analysis of the digital media representations, the academic and practical study of gaming and game worlds benefits also the approaches presented in this volume.

In the chapters, the writers put these tools to a use by applying them to empiria. The (popular) art works are reflected against the backdrop of narratological, social media and ludological theories and semiotic-rhetorical approaches. The editors tune each of the three sections by an opening chapter. While some of the contributions consist of shortened chapters from previously published work, the main part consist of original contributions. However, there are some fuzzy approaches and weak links that need to be elaborated in order to evolve further studies of digital fiction.

An anecdote of a dramatic principle, *Checkov´s gun*, concerns of actual narrative and meaning making construction in the fiction. "If a rifle is not going to be fired it should not be hanging there". Three "rifles" in the volume should be fired; discussion on the actual definition of digital fiction itself after the analysis; the role of the reader-player and, the epistemological basis of reception theory.

In the Introduction chapter, editors Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad look on the "waves" of the study, literature theories and approaches in digital fiction analysis. They frame with clarity the history of digital fiction scholarship. The aim of the volume is to "explore methodological approaches to digital fiction". The "credo", the definition of digital fiction and commitment to analytical transparency are set as a focal point. The editors define digital fiction" as form of literature that analyses texts". The Digital Fiction InternationalNetwork definition 2010 is as follows:

> "[f]iction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function of it were removed from that medium [...] fiction whose structure, form and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with, the digital context in which it is produced and received."

In the scope of the volume the question of the implicit or actual reader assumed in the definition. In digital fiction, the interaction is technology dependent and this has consequences in terms of the actual text, the reader-player and reception. The definition and commitment hold a central position in the Introduction. The history of digital fiction research is represented in a way that leads to the aim of the volume, to the transparent and systematic methodological approaches and media-specific attributes . Several concepts are left hanging or undefined, they sometimes appear as buzzwords. However, inside the toolbox a selection of practical tools are ready to use also in the field of game analysis, as soon as they are identified among buttons, bits and pieces.

One of the most elaborated approaches in the volume is the theoretical and analytical approach of narratology and possible world theory in the first section. The narratology approaches are aligned with a thematic analysis in the connection with the chosen empirical material and the theoretical framework. The philosophical

concept of possible world connects the chapters together. The analysis combines literary concepts with the digital components that directs the aesthetic experience: links, cursor, and user interface are elaborated with narratological approaches. Marie-Laure Ryan (1991/2012) writes, how reality is constructed by several distinctive worlds and thus, forms the foundation to possible world theory. This plurality invite breaks and transgression on the borderlines of narrative universes, or layers of an artwork. The diegetic worlds of fiction are experienced in a certain historical context.

Alice Bell analyses the narrative concept of metalepsis as the central means by which the actual reader-player navigates in digital fiction: sound effects, cursor and external links. The concept and study of metalepsis begins in 1980´s as a literary genre approaching discursive studies in narratology. Metalepsis is a construction of several narrative layers that opens a new narrative or dialogue between them. David Chiccoricco revisits classical narrative theory by focalization of the links, meaning the variable movements afforded in the digital fiction composition. The focalization of links allows for mood, tone and themes. These take place on the interface as a process, that Chiccoricco defines cybernetic narration.

Daniel Punday analyses the structure, conditions and action upon which the reader/player enters to digital fiction in games and in interactive fiction.He discusses, how the text guides the continuity of the narrative by the user interface, texture and agents of the video game *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. The multiple streams of information in fiction puts the reader/player in work for narrative coherence which is ensured by means, clues and affirmations given by the text; by health; by map or, by material objects. This creates a secondary set of user interface.

Bell´s and Chiccoricco´s chapters are versions of previous work, while Punday´s work is an original manuscript. In the three chapters, the chosen aim and tools are clear until the complex of approaches are established and therefore the text is not always easy to follow. Bell, Chiccoricco and Punday base their analysis on the solid concept relating to the media-specific aesthetics.

The second section opens with Astrid Ensslin´s coherent chapter on video games as literary-fictional texts. As artifacts, the video games are in the realm of play and artwork. Ensslin is the only author in the volume who fires the *Checkov´s gun*.

In her article she reflects the digital fiction definition against the borderlines that exclude pivotal areas in digital culture. From her perspective, video games hold elements that are readable or narrative. Ensslin develops the Marie-Laure Ryan´s idea of functional ludo-narrativism (cited in Enssilin, 2014, Ryan 2006, 23) and analyses games and gaming as complex of literary art and digital fiction. The function and means of narrative play and game are defined in the historical, cultural and social sphere they appear. From this perspective, the ludic-literary hybridity of video games suggests a complex analysis and several viewpoints.

Ensslin establishes the analytical approach on definition, on the toolbox and theoretical cross perspectives. The analysis is transparent from the introduction to the conclusions, and the focus keeps on the presented frameworks of metaludicity, allusive fallacy and illusory agency. The analysis enlightens *The Path* (2007) as a game and gameplay from aesthetic and literate standpoint connecting it fast on cultural and contemporary discourses. Moreover, the analysis looks the game from the perspective, where the act of gaming itself can be literate and convention sensitive at the same time.

Thomas´ chapter on Twitterfiction analyses 140 characters fiction of Arjun Basú, the serial forms of retelling popular fiction and religious texts in Twitter narratives. Tosca focuses on the players in the reading process of a game where elements of game and story are equally important and the reader/player moves in the game. The game analysis on *Amnesia*: *the Dark Descent* and *12th September* underline the immersion of the model reader/player. Isabell Kleiber analyses writing platforms for collaborative participation in a social and aesthetic sphere of fiction. In her material, comments and assessments create a secondary storyline for the primary story and plot.

Thomas and Tosca both are describing the most interesting material, while analysis remain in narrative level of description. In Kleiber´s chapter, the empirical material of user-data is difficult to follow because of the layout. The material and long quotations lack indention. Moreover, the empirical material references and the location of the source material used in analysis remains unexplained. This is regrettable and unexpected in an academic edited volume.

The semiotic-rhetorical approaches in the third section opens with a chapter from Hans Kristian Rustad. He analyses digital fiction from post-colonial and cultural studies approach. He elaborates the notion on literature movement from print to digital media that provides authenticity over dominant Western genre to discuss migration equally. A hybrid literary work *Flight Paths* (2007) is about immigration, otherness and cultural encounter. Readers may submit their thoughts and solutions on the story and postcolonial dilemmas. Rustad focuses on his analysis on word, image and sound and the capabilities of the Internet.

The semiotic approach builts on the temporal and spatial division between separate art forms and their limitations. By bringing these forms together in digital literature, the new aesthetics chances the conventions of linear and closed systems of narrative to more multivocal and heterogenic. The clear analysis is rooted on the multimodality that creates a cultural arrangement of subtle semiotic resources on the screen.

Serge Bouchardon´s chapter present a method on gestural manipulation. Hierarchical and cumulative, it begins from the simple semiotic unit and ends up with complex. Alexandra Saemmer´s article elaborate on reader´s expectations horizon and the social and personal sphere of reading experience. The analysis focuses on the representations and narrative but cease to discuss of the socio-historical contextualization of the text. In these last two chapters the original sin of semiotic theory arises. While the theory itself is generative, the actual analysis thickens and loses its lucidity and transparency.

The Afterword by Roberto Simanowski looks from different angle the lived history of contemporary approaches on digital literature research and discussions on concepts. Simanowski expresses his concern on the consumeristic trait on the digital culture. Heasks an important question about audience. By this question, the discussion of the changes in reception are put forward. Art forms have tendency to test the patience of their audiences in the pursuit of aesthetic interaction.

The Three Riflers of Checkov

The writers in many cases give negative definition for digital fiction against the backdrop of printed literature/cinema/video games. In the chapters, this identification process are repeated in the extent. While the identity is not discussed

in the chapters nor in the Introduction, the volume misses the opportunity to gather and elaborate this contribution on the definition itself. As mentioned before, Ensslin begins from outside the framework and definition, and concludes that, from the ludic and literate perspective, video games are not separate from digital fiction.

The role of the reader is mentioned in the chapters with the terms of reader-user/-player/-interpreter/-cursor/-viewer as a participant, decision maker, organizer and as an audience of possible worlds. These definitions on the reader represent the variety of the axiomes behind epistemological foundations of reception and the aesthetic experience. The claims on the reader, in most of the cases, are discussed from the model reader position which unfortunately is not always clearly stated. This is the case especially in the chapters that have built their argument on Iser´s Reader Response theory, which is constructed on a model reader. However, the model reader and the actual reader represent different perspectives to the reception, as stated in the third section. Therefore, in the case of reading experiences, the axioms on reader should be cleared when they are theoretical constructions, and when an actual reader/player is studied in certain cultural and historical contexts.

In the Introduction, reception is a "logistical difficulty" with a warning sign of "scholars nightmare".However, the identity process of digital fiction is about possible worlds and transgressions of visible borders, following creative paths and tolerating delay and *cul-de-sacs*. Staying on its comfort zone, the study of digital fiction will evidently cease to scrutinize the epistemological foundations. When the role of the reader/player/audience is described as active or participating in the context of new media studies, the definition comes with an implication that outside, audience or reader is in different quality: passive and non-participating, which of course is not the case. The passive/active position of the reader or, aesthetic interplay of deep and

surface reading however, are important and central notions which need scrutinizing in the same fashion and passion as the digital fiction text do; with transparent and systematic method.

Aesthetic interplay of attention, deep and surface reading are orientations to text and matters of interaction. In the literary studies are philosophical and aesthetic questions, but they are also question addressed to the reader-player: what it is, that actually happens in the course of the play? Moreover, the awareness for media-specific features of digital fiction are on one side practical and close to the reader/player. It can thus well described as a question that is not discussed in the chapters. The transmediality of texts is an evolving concept that can be understood defining the digital storytelling in one media platform or, digital storytelling across different media platforms where again, the reader-user is front of the screen. (see e.g. Jenkins 2003; Scolari 2009)

The instructive and meticulous index would certainly serve the scholars and students of digital fiction and literature. The brief form does not do justice to the volume and the analysis and leaves an unintended mess in the tool box. The systematical approach to the concepts relates to the index. In the representation of the empirical material, further studies benefit of the conscious and coherent style concerning layout, screen shots, intends, and accurate reference style, sources and bibliography is communicated.

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