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Gamevironments from the perspective of an actant. ChatGPT (prompt: "gamevironments").

10th Anniversary Issue

Gamevironments Revisited

Issue 21 (2024)

introduction

Gamevironments as an Analytical Lens for Studying Gaming and Culture. A Critical Revision

by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, 1-33

articles

A Ludic Litmus Test. *Sara Is Missing*, Gamevironments, and Gregory Bateson's Theory of Play by Gregory Price Grieve, 34-59

Cultural Heritage, Video Games and Video Gaming. Researching Global Actants with Gamevironments by Xenia Zeiler, 60-83

Ludonarratology and Gamevironments in Dialogue by Zhange Ni, 84-118

Community, Alienation and the Experience of Networks. Gamevironments and Theories of Community by Dom Ford, 119-143

Video Games Beyond Play. Decolonizing Gamevironments

by Christopher Helland, 144-165

Gamevironments Revisited from the Perspective of Game Production Studies by Vít Šisler and Jan Švelch, 166-207

reviews

Videoludic Metalepsis. A Review of Agata Waszkiewicz's *Metagames: Games on Games* (2024) by Stefano Gualeni, 208-214

Review of Tom Tyler's *Game: Animals, Videogames, and Humanity* (2022) by Agata Waszkiewicz, 215-220

Review of Melissa Kagen's *Wandering Games* (2022) by Manh-Toan Ho, 221-226

Videoludic Metalepsis. A Review of Agata Waszkiewicz's

Metagames: Games on Games (2024)

Stefano Gualeni

Abstract

A review of Agata Waszkiewicz's book Metagames: Games on Games (2024).

Keywords: Book Review, Metagames, Metalepsis, gamevironments

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I very much enjoyed *Metagames: Games on Games*, written by Dr. Agata Waskiewicz and published by Routledge in 2024. It is a keenly and sharply written book, and – given my professional interest in the themes discussed in it – I found *Metagames* extremely useful. So much so, in fact, that I have read it twice, and recommended it to my graduate students several times.

Waskiewicz's book is an almost encyclopedic compendium of cases of meta-fiction and meta-referentiality that can be encountered (and are designed to be encountered) in videogames. The author organized those cases in thematic chapters and analyzed them through a variety of theoretical lenses, the most prominent among them being those of game studies and literary theory. As already mentioned, the points made in the book are clearly presented, and are made additionally relevant to the experience of the implied readers (admittedly media scholars and game study <u>208</u>

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scholars) by means of a great variety of well-chosen and vividly explained videogame examples.

Now, before listing the qualities and the parts that made *Metagames* stand out for me, I would like to frontload some criticism. This somewhat unusual decision – at least in relation to the canonical book review format – will allow me to close this piece on the sweet note that the book deserves.

As a game scholar and someone with an interest in fiction and literary theory, I have two main points of dissatisfaction with Waszkiewicz's *Metagames*, namely:

- the book's title, and
- its (perhaps too) close resonance with the author's doctoral dissertation.

In the two sub-sections below, I will do my best to present what I mean, tackling one point at a time.

The Title

Judging by its cover, Waszkiewicz's book focuses on *Metagames*, a category of games that – the subtitle informs the reader – invite the player to reflect on games themselves. In multiple occasions, the author talks about those works as games about games, or games on games. To begin with, I want to raise the point that *Metagames* exclusively discusses videogames. From that perspective, it would have been desirable to clarify that the overarching theme of the book is videogames about videogames, and not a general approach to games that focus on gameness and play. <u>209</u>

In the same vein, it is also important to observe that *Metagames* is not really focused on those videogames "that are deliberately designed to materialize, through their gameplay and their aesthetic qualities, critical and/or satirical perspectives on the ways in which videogames themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects" (Gualeni 2016). Instead, the book discusses about a vast array of videogame-related phenomena tied to videoludic meta-referentiality and meta-fictionality. The presence of metalepsis, metareferentiality and elements of meta-fiction – as the author admits several times in their book – are not always a guarantee of a meta-critical attitude. What Waszkiewicz's book discusses, in other words, are not always self-reflexive works. They were not always designed for self-reflection and do not inherently have a political or philosophical message. In that sense, Metagames does not solely cover games on games, but instead covers a horizon videoludic phenomena tied to (or directly emerging from) meta-referentiality and meta-fictionality. The book analyses, for example, mini-games, cozy games, and masocore games as videogame forms that borrow from (and often subvert) established ludic conventions. Their deviating from an alleged videoludic norm is not always pursued with satirical or critical intents, however, but is often an attempt to occupy (or to carve) a market niche, or to satisfy untapped player preference related, for example, to game difficulty.

I could make that same point concerning various other themes of the book such as those of game metaphors or hypermediacy. In light of this critical point, the book title could have been less equivocally titled something like *Videoludic Metalepsis: An Exploration of Metareferentiality and Metafictionality in Digital Games*. <u>210</u>

Re-Editing a Dissertation

In the words of the author, *Metagames* has been rewritten from their doctoral dissertation. On the one hand, the nuanced and meticulous ways in which the book presents its contents and introduces definitions, arguments, and case studies is a big part of what made this book useful and commendable for this reviewer. On the other hand, *Metagames* still often reads and feels too close to a doctoral dissertation. I am mostly referring to the occasional use of technical jargon and the frequent in-text citations. Formal qualities like these might discourage a scholar from adjacent fields – or an undergraduate in game studies or media studies – from picking up the book, which would be a pity. Do not get me wrong: the text is clearly not a dissertation. It incorporates various new works and ideas from the author, and an effort to make the reading experience smoother and less taxing is palpable. The point I am making is that the re-editing was not as thorough and not as geared towards accessibility as it could have been. As a case in point, the author still refers to the text itself as a dissertation on a few occasions (e.g., on pages 27 and 28).

The publisher Routledge did not contribute to making *Metagames* more friendly or readable either, opting for annoying tight interlines, small font sizes, and uncomfortably narrow margins for this academic series. The paradox of trying to be frugal with paper costs and then charge 120 euros for a book is certainly not lost on readers of academic books of this kind. The author has usually little say in these matters, and it would be unfair to blame Waszkiewicz for the unfriendly format that Routledge likely imposed on them. One thing that, perhaps, the author could have fought harder for is visuals. The book features no pictures or schemes. With the focus of the text being aesthetic phenomena that can be encountered while playing videogames, explanations and examples could have been more salient and clear if supported with images. In my opinion, pictures, schemes and screenshots would also have helped breaking Routledge's walls of text, making the text more memorable and easier to navigate.

Concluding comments

Leaving my two qualms aside, I want to iterate on the fact that I found *Metagames* to be a rich, detailed, well-written and very well-informed book. I would even go as far as saying that it is a necessary reading for academics interested in themes like fourth wall breaks, unreliable narration and self-reflexivity in video games.

After an introductory chapter that frames the book's aspirations and introduces its key lexical elements, chapter one focuses on fourth wall breaks in videogames. The second chapter is on hypermediacy, with a focus and the roles played by interfaces in stimulating meta-reflective stances. The third one is dedicated, instead, to unreliable narration and unreliable narrators in videogames. The last three chapters discuss meta-referential possibilities and characteristics of videogames in a more general sense, touching on themes and topics that do not always take a meta stance in relation to the experience of gameplay. Among these more peripheral cases, chapter four targets unusual and uncomfortable videogames, chapter five focuses on the often-ironic use of mini-games, and chapter six delves into themes related to irony and satire.

The various conceptual threads running through the many themes of the book link together (and make good use of) game studies text on metalepsis, metafiction, and meta-reference, citing and connecting works by Jan-Noël Thon, Steven Conway, Alex <u>212</u>

Mitchell, Nele Van de Mosselaer and Kristine Jørgensen, just to mention a few. *Metagames* also complements similar and recent books such as Patrick Jagoda's *Experimental Games* (2020), *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* by Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell (2021), or *Fictional Games*, written by this reviewer together with Riccardo Fassone (2022).

Of particular interest in Waszkiewicz's book, in my opinion, is the sharp and useful explanation of the notion of metalepsis (in its ascending and descending variants), as well as its occurrence in videogames and videogame narratives. Also of note is the presentation of the author's original notion of twofold play.

Once again, I regard *Metagames* as a successful effort and an extremely useful book, one that I will continue to refer to it and recommend parts of it to colleagues and students working on themes such as games' unreliability, ludic discomfort, and in the <u>213</u> political and philosophical value of playful digital worlds.

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<u>214</u>