

of “implicit religion.” The usefulness of this analytical concept is the subject of an on-going debate, and most of the authors demonstrate an awareness of the need for caution. Rachel Wagner’s chapter 9 concerns play, not video games *per se*, and offers a good discussion of the complexity of defining religion. She draws careful parallels between order-making activity in game play and the construction of religious world views, and she concludes that comparing games and religion can help us learn to “play” in more mature ways. Two of the other three chapters show similar scholarly restraint. The weakest chapter in this section, chapter 10, attempts—poorly—to uncover the “spiritual efficacy” of digital games, but chapters 11 and 12 make crucial points. First, although games can present “religious worlds,” these are not equivalent to religion experienced through acts of faith. Second, the systematic nature of game rules and programming leave us with a “mechanized . . . impoverished vision of what religion means to believers” (p. 273).

Playing with Religion in Digital Games succeeds in demonstrating that religion in digital games is an important topic. Nevertheless, this anthology would have benefited from a consistent and nuanced definition of “religion” across all the essays. Some of the individual essays offer no definition of “religion”; some consider any reference to magic, cultish behavior, “gods,” “demons,” or ghostly beings sufficient to make a game “religious”; and others take pains to clarify their own operational definition of religion. It is unfortunate that a few of the essays make comparisons between religious concepts and gaming that trivialize the religious, such as the concept of salvation as a “lev-

eling up” in chapter 6. Most of the essays also overlook (or show a lack of awareness) that the use of religion in digital games tends to be quite derivative and something of a trope. Peter Likarish (chapter 8) does note that one reason religious ideas have become more prevalent in games is that they offer fresh controversy—violence and sex have been “done” so many ways in games that they are losing their ability to generate polemic.

In the end, we must always remember that digital games are primarily commercial products. The major concern for most developers is not whether a game remains “true” to a particular religion, for example, but instead whether it will sell. As veteran game writer Darby McDevitt laments in a 2010 *Gamasutra* article, “A Practical Guide to Game Writing”: “Game play must come first—this is the Golden Rule.” Religion is only one among many elements manipulated to keep game play interesting; it behooves scholars to use caution in attributing great significance to its presence in games. Analysis of religion in video games perhaps tells us less about religion or contemporary religiosity than it does about the ways in which developers recruit cultural ideas into the service of making money.

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Literary Gaming

Astrid Ensslin

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Literary Gaming by Astrid Ensslin steps over the tired question of whether video games are art. Instead, it sketches the contours of a specific type of digital game play that places the artistic use of language in the foreground. Ensslin offers a systematic methodology for assessing so-called literary games, which she demonstrates through insightful and nuanced close readings of several exemplary artifacts.

From the outset, Ensslin sees her project as a keystone for interdisciplinary collaborations among such fields of study as literature, digital media, and games (and other fields related to them). She writes with remarkable lucidity, authority, and structure given the range of topics and disciplines addressed. The book features plain language, easy-to-follow organizational structure, sharp, pithy definitions compiled in a fairly thorough glossary, and numerous illustrative charts and in-game screen shots, all of which make *Literary Gaming* extremely accessible, even for nonexperts.

After the introductory chapter, she breaks the book into two parts. In the first half, Ensslin outlines her analytical framework and, in the second half, applies it to exemplary ludo-literary hybrids. Before moving from methodology to practice, she deftly and efficiently navigates the philosophical groundings of “ludology.” This clear and concise summary of “play” and “games” as philosophical concepts will certainly be familiar to those in the field. Even so, it serves as an excellent primer for the uninitiated and as a touch point where the multiple disciplines she addresses could find common ground. An audience in literary studies, for example, might be familiar with the theorists mentioned but

not necessarily their place in game studies or their relation to more contemporary scholarship.

The real work in her theoretical background comes in the section on games and play in literary studies. Anyone who studies these topics surely knows there can be a great deal of “play” in the terminology. Ensslin’s survey of how play and games have been applied to literature demonstrates that the terms are often used interchangeably to describe quite different aesthetic practices and often with little relation to actual games “in a narrow, ludic sense” (p. 28). She emphasizes that her concept of literary gaming refers exclusively to “rule-based literary game play, which gives rise to literary games proper” (p. 31). With precious few examples of nondigital literatures with ludic mechanics, Ensslin restricts her study to works in digital media. In doing so, her book carves out a space in literary studies to address the growing field of digital games with literary aspirations.

Though Ensslin draws a sharp line between literary playfulness and rule-based games proper, her goal is not to set the two in opposition. Rather, clearly demarcated signposts aid the recognition of a spectrum between the two where ludo-literary texts engage in both in varying degrees. To chart the location of specific artifacts on this spectrum, Ensslin proposes an analytical tool kit for “close reading” literary games. Her *functional ludostylistics* assess an artifact for ludic mechanics (ludology), the relationship between game play and story (ludonarratology), the use of language and rhetoric (ludosemiotics), and the instantiation in a particular platform, software, hardware,

and so on (mediality).

For the remainder of the book, Ensslin demonstrates the application of functional ludostylistics on a number of digital literary artifacts. Her analyses cluster in the middle range of her spectrum, where the ludic and the literary manifest in mostly balanced proportions. It would have been nice to have an extended treatment of each of the extremes as a point of comparison, and Ensslin admits in the conclusion that spatial constraints prevented a more comprehensive approach. Even so, the narrow focus on the midrange establishes clearly the category of literary gaming and, at the same time, shows in practice variability in the concept.

In one respect, Ensslin's commitment to specificity forms one of the book's greatest strengths: her systematic approach mostly avoids the vagaries surrounding the concepts of "game" and "play" that produced the research gap her book now fills. Yet, her restriction to games with sufficient literariness places artificial limits on the usefulness of her methodologies. I can imagine the same tool kit applied easily to all manner of narrative-based games including ones like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) or *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) for which artful use of language is not central to the experience. These examples raise questions about how and to what degree her proposed analytical framework is specific to so-called "literary" games.

Make no mistake, the game texts Ensslin focuses on in *Literary Gaming* are important artifacts for the development of literature in a digital age. They deserve the kind of smart, careful analysis that Ensslin provides, which attends in equal measure to their unique, hybrid combinations of

the literary and ludic. In this capacity, *Literary Gaming* is an excellent example of what Ensslin calls the second wave of digital literary criticism, concerned less with definitions than with developing methods for addressing specific artifacts. Yet it leaves me wondering whether the field has "matured," as Ensslin suggests, on its own terms, or finally produced artifacts that sufficiently resemble already established artistic practices and critical traditions.

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Mindfulness-Based Play-Family Therapy

Dottie Higgins-Klein

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In the acknowledgments of Dottie Higgins-Klein's *Mindfulness-Based Play-Family Therapy*, the author mentions that her book, ". . . has taken a lifetime to develop and 12 years to write" (p. xv). From the first chapter on child development and interpersonal neurobiology to subsequent chapters on intake, stages of mindfulness-based family-play therapy, parent education, and a final rich and thorough case study, Higgins-Klein aptly communicates her passion for and knowledge of working with families and children in play therapy. Her depth of thinking and style of writing is accessible to both students and seasoned practitioners interested in helping those