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Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Herrigan: First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game

By Julian Kücklich

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Abstract

First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game is a collection of essays by new media practitioners and theorists. Starting out from the question whether computer games can be regarded as a form of 'electronic literature,' the book's contributors address different aspects of digital games and their media context. In this review, Julian Kücklich argues that the book fails to deliver what its title promises, but that this failure exposes some of the problems new media studies are faced with today. On the one hand, academic publishing seems to constantly increase the gap between new media scholarship and its objects of study. On the other hand, the conservatism of new media theory makes it almost impossible to address this dilemma. Thus, the book emerges as an interesting contribution to the discourse of new media, although a large part of the collection has been superseded by newer publications in journals and on-line.

Disclaimer

As it turned out this review contains inaccurate information about the circumstances of the book's publication. The author has been asked to provide us with a revised version.

1. Computer Game Studies, Year Zero

A lot has happened in computer game studies since Espen Aarseth published his influential article "Computer Game Studies, Year One" (*Game Studies* 1.1) in July 2001. In 2002, game researchers from all over the world gathered at Playing with the Future (Manchester), Computer Games and Digital Culture (Tampere) and Challenge of Computer Games (Łódź). These conferences not only led to the creation of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), which held its first conference of its own, Level Up, in Utrecht in October 2003, they also sparked debates that are still going on today.

These debates have left their traces in the Table of Contents of *First Person. New Media as Story Performance and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Herrigan. There are chapters dedicated to 'Cyberdrama', 'Ludology' and 'Critical Simulation'. The list of contributors reads like a *Who's Who* of game studies: Espen Aarseth, Chris Crawford, Gonzalo Frasca, Jesper Juul, Janet Murray... – and the list goes on.

But looking inside the book, one can hardly recognise the progress made in the past 3 years: Janet Murray is still looking for Hamlet on the Holodeck, while Espen Aarseth and Markku Eskelinen are still trying to defend the field of game studies from imaginary invaders. And Gonzalo Frasca still advertises "Dave's Alcoholic Mother version 0.9" as the solution to a more critical engagement with videogames. Indeed, it seems as if we have gone backward in time, not forward: once again, it is year zero for computer game studies.

While this might be due to the fact that print publishing, especially academic publishing, is not really an appropriate medium for writing about new media, the anachronism of *First Person* also seems to be the result of a certain conservatism in new media studies in general, and digital games studies in particular. In their zeal to legitimize their object of study, scholars of new media often overshoot the goal, and take a position that seems positively reactionary.

Paradoxically, it seems as if the tender age of the medium fosters the traditionalism that is so wide-spread in game studies, whether it manifests itself as a desire to reconcile computer games with Aristotelian poetics or the endlessly repeated truism that "videogames are, before anything else, games" (Frasca, 85).

It is possible to discern similar tendencies in new media studies in general. Lev Manovich's study of digital media through the lens of Dziga Vertov's *kino-eye* (in *The Language of New Media*) is yet another attempt to bridge the gap between old methodologies and new phenomena. But it doesn't have to be that way. As I said earlier, much has happened in game studies in the last three years. For example, TL Taylor and James Newman have successfully applied methods of new media studies to digital games. These approaches benefit from the insights gleaned from cultural studies, ethnography and political economy, among others.

Still, Espen Aarseth insists that "[u]nlike in music, where a national anthem played on electric guitar takes on a whole new meaning, the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules" (48). In other words, it does not matter whether Agent 47 in *Hitman* is a Russian spy during the Cold War, a CIA agent eliminating political opponents of the ruling party, or an eco-terrorist seeking revenge for corporate crimes against the environment.

I, for one, beg to differ. Not just because I think the scenario of games makes a difference in the actual gameplay experience, but also because adopting Aarseth's

stance makes it impossible for us to criticise games from an ideological point of view. Let us take one of the more sinister examples of the recent years: America's Army, a game commissioned by the US military to enlist new recruits. Infamously, this game does not let you choose sides: even when two players are playing against each other, they see themselves represented as American soldiers, while their opponents are depicted as 'enemy forces'.

From a 'ludological' as well as an 'Aristotelian' point of view, there is nothing wrong with *America's Army*. Good gameplay, good story, good game. Even if Aarseth and Murray cannot agree whether there is discrepancy or synergy between game and narrative, they can still achieve a truce over a game like this. This allows us to see the underlying problem of digital game studies: 'narratologists' and 'ludologists' alike would rather be fragged to bits than make a negative value judgement.

The reason for this is to be found in the history of game studies: once upon a time, videogames were only taken seriously by psychologists. They would lock up a 14-year-old to play *Street Fighter II* for 48 hours straight, submit him to a marathon of Rorschach ink blot tests, and then come out of the lab convinced of the detrimental effects of videogames (but without a second thought about the detrimental effects of their testing methods).

When game studies emerged from the primordial digital ooze in the mid-1990s, this kind of research was still prevalent. It is therefore understandable that 'serious' game researchers are loath to utter a bad word about their object of study. If they would proclaim a certain videogame 'bad', this might be taken to mean that *all* videogames are bad. So, to be on the safe side, game studies has reverted to a particularly bland variant of formalism and stuck to it.

2. The Language of Old Media

The reader of the first two sections of *First Person* is therefore likely not to experience the 'shock of the new' but rather a shock of recognition as she trawls through page after page of rewrites of old articles by the same old theorists. What is so shocking about this is not the fact that some of these articles have been reprinted, almost verbatim, from other sources, but rather the fact that the authors have been given the opportunity to update their writings, but elected to squander it.

This is not only true for established authors such as Murray and Aarseth, but also for young academics like Gonzalo Frasca and Michael Mateas. Mateas, whose essay responds to Janet Murray's, chose to contribute a stripped-down version of the mid-project report (originally published in 2002) of Façade, an interactive drama created collaboratively with his colleague Andrew Stern.

Two years might not seem like a long time, but since a beta version of *Façade* has been demonstrated on numerous occasions, it would have been more illuminating to hear about the lessons learned from observing users interacting with the software than to read a design document that is already obsolete in some points.

In a similar fashion, Frasca's contribution consists of a condensed version of his MA thesis, *Videogames of the Oppressed* (2001). Again, insights gained from his own practical work with newsgaming.com and *Water Cooler Games* would have been more interesting than the material presented in the book.

However, instead of lamenting the shortcomings of the articles in the book's first two sections, I would rather draw the reader's attention to the one truly outstanding article in the midst of this swamp of mediocrity. This is Stuart Moulthrop's essay 'From Work to Play: Molecular Culture in the Time of Deadly Games'.

It begins with an account of the author's difficulties of taking games seriously in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. But he is quick to point out that "[y]et games and play demand serious attention even in such times as these, and perhaps especially now" (56). In trying to reconcile the ludologist Markku Eskelinen and the 'Aristotelian' Janet Murray, Moulthrop points out that while catharsis might be an outmoded concept in the age of 'information filtering', Murray must be credited with pointing out that losing a game is often much more interesting than winning.

Taking up Eskelinen's concept of a paradigmatic shift from interpretation to configuration, Moulthrop offers a brief analysis of the promotional game for the film *A.I.*, pointing out that by integrating communication media into the gameplay, the game draws attention to email, blogs and newsgroups as configurative practices. Importantly, he points out that although "[i]t might be absurd to suggest that all interactive media are species of game, but games do seem to offer a useful way of thinking about such media" (64).

Thus, Moulthrop locates the rising interest in digital games within a larger ludic turn that affects all areas of society and culture to a certain degree. He stresses the political implications of this shift from interpretation to configuration and asserts that "the immersiveness of games differs crucially from that of narratives" (65). "If narrative forms play any role in the process by which 'we lose consciousness of the medium'," he argues, "there may be good reason to turn away from storytelling as the prime agenda of art" (66).

This draws attention to the question whether immersion should be the ideal game designers strive for. Realizing that immersiveness depends on the transparency of the interface allows us to question the politics of immersion: "Transparent media may not bear much scrutiny, but happily for business elites, they do not present themselves for inspection" (66). In other words, a certain degree of *Verfremdung*

might not only be desirable in digital games, but might be of crucial importance in the maturation of the medium.

3. Order, Please

Before turning to the next section of the book, I would like to lose a few words about the format of *First Person*. The book is arranged as an 'imagined panel discussion' between the contributors. In practice, this means that alongside each essay the reader will find a response by one of the other contributors, an excerpt from a further response from the book's website, and a final statement by the original author.

While in theory this sounds like a good way to foster discussion among contributors, in reality it only adds to the reader's confusion as she frantically tries to discern the common thread in this tangle of arguments and fragmentary counter-arguments. In fact, the format of the book looks suspiciously like a re-invention of the peer-reviewed article – only that the task of reconciling different views is transferred from the author to the reader. While this might be seen as a 'liberation' of the reader by some, I see it as a symptom of the sloppy editing that also manifests itself in other aspects of *First Person*, such as the careless proofreading and the occasionally chaotic layout.

On a related note, I am appalled by the prospect of an 'imagined panel discussion' in which none of the speakers is introduced. As the list of contributors ranges from the illustrious to the obscure, it would have been a service to the reader to give some indication who on earth these people are.

In all fairness, it must be said that there are some cases in which the responses genuinely add to the argument brought forth in the original article, such as Will Wright's response to Ken Perlin's essay, "Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?", in which Wright reflects on the role of the designer as the creator of "a landscape of possibilities" (13).

However, the reader is likely to miss these rare glimpses of a possible dialogue across disciplines, as the compression of the online responses into mere soundbites will discourage her from reading the responses at all. In general, the responses range from the irrelevant to the polemical, and in many cases they are a distraction rather than a contribution.

4. Critical Errors

Moulthrop's question regarding the reconciliation of immersion and ideological critique is taken up in the third section of *First Person*, "Critical Simulation". In many respects, this section and the one following it are the best parts of the book. Compared to the other sections, "Critical Simulation" and "Game Theories" are more coherent and the quality of the arguments brought forward is generally higher than in the other chapters.

Although Simon Penny's argument in "Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation," is weakened by references to anti-videogame activist David Grossman (<http://www.killology.com/>), he raises some interesting points that game researchers would be well advised to take into consideration. It is simply unreasonable, after all, to advertise games as educational tools, while at the same time steadfastly denying a possible link between virtual and real-world violence (see the discussion of violence in computergames by Claus Pias)

In the "Game Theories" section, Henry Jenkins' essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" particularly deserves the reader's attention. Jenkins sets out to find "a middle ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists" (119), and although Jon McKenzie's observation that this middle ground "remains slanted toward the narratological end of things" is accurate, Jenkins should be lauded for his attempt to mediate between the two schools. He helpfully points out points of agreement between ludologists and narratologists, but he also identifies ludology's "conceptual blind spots" in regard to narrative. Chief among these is ludology's failure to understand that narratives can operate across different media and do not have to be self-contained. As Jenkins usefully points out in response to Jesper Juul: "The *Star Wars* game may not simply retell the story of *Star Wars*, but it doesn't have to in order to enrich or expand our experience of the *Star Wars* saga" (124).

Unfortunately, the other articles in this part of the book appear to be re-formulations of earlier writings. Such is the case with Gonzalo Frasca's as well as Jesper Juul's, Celia Pearce's and Eric Zimmerman's contributions. In Zimmerman's case, this seems to be due to a delayed publication schedule, as his article has been preceded and superseded by his and Katie Salen's book *Rules of Play*.

5. Beyond Hypertext

The section that follows, "Hypertexts & Interactives", suffers from a lack of definition that has been the hallmark of hypertext theory for almost 15 years. Hypertext is, after all, a generic term for all kinds of texts that allow the embedding of links, and

thus applies to dictionary entries as well as news websites, text-based adventure games and database entries. Hypertext fiction, on the other hand, comprises only a tiny fraction of the hypertexts an average user encounters. Trying to define 'hypertext' in a fashion that includes all its myriad forms while remaining specific enough to be useful is akin to the Sisyphos task of defining the term 'computer game'. Both phenomena can be said to possess a certain family likeness, but a definition based on these features is bound to exclude some specimens. Therefore, it might be time to get rid of the term 'hypertext' and use more specific terms.

The same can be said about the seemingly irradicable terminological ragweed 'interactive', which occurs here in its less widespread, but equally odious nominal form. Disregarding the fact that face-to-face communication and telecommunication are by far the most widespread forms of interaction, 'interactivity' keeps getting flaunted as characteristic of new media.

Regrettably, the contributors to this section do nothing to remedy this sorry state of affairs, and in some cases even exacerbate it. While Mark Bernstein's and Diane Greco's article on 'exotic' hypertext tools steers clear of technological determinism so commonly found in hypertext theory, Stephanie Strickland's as well as J. Yellowlees Douglas' and Andrew Hargadon's articles implicitly present hypertext as a step 'beyond' printed text. In statements such as "An oscillating, or flickering, pattern has often been invoked with regard to electronic art" (184), Strickland seems to superfluously re-invent post-structuralism, while Douglas and Hargadon brush aside decades of reader-response criticism and audience research by claiming, "we know relatively little about the affective pleasures of reading" (192).

Refusing to learn lessons learnt the hard way in other disciplines, Douglas and Hargadon tackle the thorny problem of pleasure in digital media with a purely formalist approach. This would hardly be worth mentioning if this disregard for more appropriate methodology was not so typical of the approach to new media presented in *First Person* in general.

A notable exception to this rule is Warren Sack's essay, "What Does A Very Large-Scale Conversation Look Like?", in section VII, "Beyond Chat". Here, Sack describes Conversation Map, a tool for the analysis of discussion groups on the internet. Combining approaches from computational linguistics, social network analysis and graphical interface design, he sets out to describe the distinct patterns created by different forms of 'reciprocation' (a much more appropriate term than 'interaction') and how they can be analysed. Importantly, Sack regards this primarily as a navigation device, rather than a research tool, and his concept of navigation is informed by the concept of self-governance. In her response, Phoebe Sengers justly identifies Conversation Map as a critical technical practice (CTP), pointing to the huge potential of this tool in all kinds of internet-related research. In stark contrast to other contributions in *First Person*, Sack's approach appears moderate at first

sight, but is revolutionary in its potential implications. If this tool lives up to its promise it should make it easier to make sense of the world wide web for researchers and users alike.

6. Against Configuration

The last section, "New Readings", attempts to map new forms of reading by bringing together three subjective accounts of interactions with new media. Of these, only Jill Walker's essay "How I Was Played by Online Caroline" is worth mentioning, as N. Katherine Hayles' contribution is a reprint of her SIGGRAPH 2001 paper, and Nick Montfort's article merely sums up his book *Twisty Little Passages*. Walker recounts her interaction with *Online Caroline*, a fictional character that, according to Walker, permeates her everyday life "in a way that is unlike other fictional characters" (304). Online Caroline employs data gathering techniques widely used in marketing, but "rarely used in art, narratives, or games" (however, readers familiar with *Metal Gear Solid* will be reminded of the mind-reading powers of Psycho Mantis).

As in *Metal Gear Solid*, however, the 'personalization' of the interaction between Jill and Caroline is merely an effect, similar to the *effet de réel* described by Roland Barthes. What is interesting about this interaction is the effect this effect has on the human participant: Walker creates a second persona to interact with Caroline and puts her to the test, thus becoming, as it were, an 'unreliable narratee'. Nevertheless the author claims not to be a player herself, but to be played by the simulation.

This raises several questions that would have warranted further reflection. Chief among these is the question how the bond between narrator and narratee in Online Caroline differs from the identification experienced in other forms of narrative. In Italo Calvino's and Vladimir Nabokov's fiction – aptly named playtexts by Warren Motte – the reader is very much a collaborator, and the devices used by these authors to 'read the reader' are, in a way, much more sophisticated than those employed by Online Caroline.

7. Conclusion

But, alas, this is where the story, and *First Person*, ends. The reader is left in a quagmire of questions, but of course this is not necessarily a bad thing. The best thing that can be said about the book, then, is that it fails in an interesting way. It fails because it tries to do too many things at once. The editors' attempt to bring

together voices ranging across different disciplines, from art, academia and elsewhere, deserves respect, but it will hardly convince a critical reader who sets out to learn about new media as story, performance and game.

Ultimately, *First Person* doesn't hold the promise made in the title: it doesn't teach us about new media, it teaches us about the people who use (and abuse) them. Some of them are academics and some of them are practitioners, but they all have one thing in common: they have no clue what they are dealing with. But, then, neither do we, the users of new media. It is reassuring to know that we are all in the same boat.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Herrigan:

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