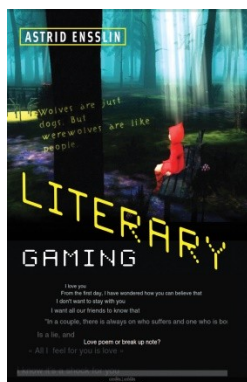# Playful Words within Playful Worlds

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Astrid ENSSLIN, *Literary Gaming*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014, 206 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-02715-1.

Hybrid specificities of digital ludoliterary artifacts, being one of the reasons for the permeation of literary studies into more recent fields of knowledge, such as game studies, is also an evidence of the difficulties critics and scholars experience when it comes to the stiff yet rather unavoidable task of ascribing taxonomies and categorizations for each fresh artifact that begins to be discussed. In this sense, every new digital work of literary art that is published, increasingly online, constitutes a challenge in the sense that it will probably defy previous analyses of similar works, presenting additional specificities to the increasing hybridism that characterizes these works. Within this particular challenge, authors of books dealing with these types of artifacts and themes, either for the purpose of a dissertation or in the context of a textbook on a particular subject of interest, also have the mandatory task of selecting a reasonable and accurate corpus of works in order to confirm their statements. And, for this purpose, a methodological approach tends to be a valid alternative when it comes to maintaining such a focus.

Such is the task of Astrid Ensslin, in her recent book *Literary Gaming* (2014), investigating a wide range of somewhat contemporary digital works of literary art (Ensslin's corpus covers the first decade of this current century), which combine both ludic and literary aspects at different levels and varying intensities. Foretelling "a growing body of hybrid artifacts that blend verbal and other arts with videogame technologies" (1) in future experimental

digital practices, Ensslin manages to create her particular "toolkit" to close-read/close-play ludoliterary artifacts that, beginning with the book's title, she defines as "literary gaming": a broad and paradoxical definition that seems to fall a little bit short taking into account the author's choice of mostly digital works. Despite the lack of a subtitle, such a definition seems to find its purpose considering the two parts into which the book is divided.

Part I (17-54), presenting "Theories and Methodologies" in two theoretical chapters that support the choice of case studies discussed by Ensslin, particularly due to its extension, *prima facie*, could likewise fit in the definition of Introduction, a choice that would unavoidably turn the book into a casebook. In fact, making use of only thirty-six pages, Ensslin manages to present summarized philosophical foundations of ludology, examples of the employment of games and play as aesthetic tools of subversion and transgression, a brief relation between the concepts of games, play and literature, some notes on born-digital literature and literary art games "as two digital art forms that blend into various forms of literary gaming", plus an entire chapter dedicated to the explanation of the functionality and purpose of her method of analysis. Nonetheless, if one understands this first part as a necessary context for Part II, the core of the book, plus the target audience the author constantly mentions (Ensslin introduces both literary scholars and ludologists as two significant parts of the book's audience), this kind of structure seems to fit a purpose.

Part II (55-160), six chapters long, each chapter analysing digital literary "games" that move along a literary-ludic continuum permeated by the phenolmenological clash between deep and hyper attention (a clash coined by N. Katherine Hayles in 2007), serves to implement and validate Ensslin's methodological approach. The L-L spectrum, as defined by Ensslin, is a simple chart with a 1-10 grid that guides the reader throughout the book and aids the author with her categorization of the selected digital works. This method Ensslin defines as "functional ludostylistics", well-crafted upon previous theories of ludology and narratology, such as Roger Caillois's typology of play, Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric and Marie-Laure Ryan's functional ludonarra-tivism, uses seminal references of ludology and narratology in a condensed though incisive way, proving to be specifically suitable for the digital environ-ment of these kinds of literary gaming, which require not only the use of close-reading techniques, but also a close-playing approach. Divided into four central compartments (ludology, ludonarratology, ludosemiotics and mediality), Ensslin's method also proves effective in giving the artifacts their place inside a possible spectrum of collaboration between literary and game studies.

Doing justice to such a methodical system, each of these six chapters contains four subheadings operating in an identical structure from chapter to chapter. All of them starting with a proper Introduction to the analyzed category of literary gaming, followed by two or, in some cases, three subchapters dedicated to a close-reading/close-playing of the selected works,

and ending with a discussion where the author always confronts the central object of analysis with other more or less similar works. Plus, each work mentioned and analyzed has its proper representation in the L-L spectrum, always accompanied by a sound justification of her 1-10 ratings. Notwithstanding the dangers of such a rating, since, as Ensslin puts it, such a hybridism can never be fully compatible with the assertiveness of charts, this particular path proves to have its proper logic. Starting with the analysis of works presenting more literary than ludic features and ending with works that tend to present what Ensslin calls ludic mechanics. Thus, from works classified as ludic hypertext literature (ch. 4) and ludic hypertext fiction (ch. 5), one evolves through the spectrum of works that present features of antiludicity and of ludic mechanics (ch. 6), the particular genres of epic interactive fiction (ch. 7) and poetic games (ch. 8), ending with a final chapter dedicated to the specific category of Literary Auteur Games (ch.9).

The author's selection of works, in the context of the aforementioned methodological approach, proves to be effective, in the way it represents every category of the L-L spectrum, allowing the reader to sense the constant phenomenological shifts between deep and hyper attention that these works question. Of course, one could always argue that other examples could be brought to discussion. However, as the author explains, her method of functional ludostylistics was created with the fundamental purpose of serving as a toolkit to be adopted by readers, regardless of their background, giving the analyzed works the role of models.

A significant characteristic presented by a fair majority of the works discussed by Ensslin relies on the fact of being designed and distributed as metagames that, on one hand, tend to question "the rapid growth and diversification of the gaming industry" and, on the other hand, perceiving "a sharp increase in the awareness of the importance of play and games as constitutive elements of human nature and everyday life" (20). Thus, one can argue that its higher or lower literariness is what allows the coexistence of these previous and somewhat paradoxical intentions. A combination that is not confined to digital literary gaming, as is the case of pervasive games or of the broader concept of gamification of life.

Concerning the antiludic agenda shared by nearly all of the works discussed by Ensslin, it is also worth mentioning either the critique of the dominant male view of the game industry (e.g., *The Princess Murderer*, by geniwate and Deena Larsen, 2003) or the strong influence of the avant-garde programs of the twentieth century, such as the Dadaist (e.g., *Evidence of Everything Exploding*, by Jason Nelson, 2009) or the Situationist concepts of 'détournement' and 'dérive' (e.g., *The Path*, by Tale of Tales, 2009). Being this latter case identified by Ensslin as an essential feature of slow games that tends to contradict the increasing fast pace videogames usually prescribe in their narrative structure.

Ensslin's careful use of language in *Literary Gaming*, serving a methodical system, seems to meet the author's ideal of target audience, either by complying with the analytical methodologies of ludology, or by making use of terminology and concepts specific to literary studies. This well-designed attempt to connect both fields of knowledge, further enhanced by an appealing dust jacket showing opposite sides of the L-L spectrum by means of two distinct examples of digital literary gaming, is complemented by the glossary the reader can find in the book's final pages. Also, concerning this latter section, it is worth mentioning the pertinent list of notes related to each chapter, together with a complete list of references divided into primary and secondary sources and an Index (an essential tool of considerable support for scholars yet occasionally neglected by a few seminal textbooks on media studies). Still, since the book's primary focus are digital works, facing the transient and frequently obsolete nature of this sort of digital environments, it would be useful to provide an updated list of references with direct links to the works discussed that could be accessed via the publisher's/author's webpage. Another handy complement would be the information on whether the works can be free-accessed or not, as is the case of Tale of Tales's *The Path* or Richard Holethon's *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid* (distributed by Eastgate Systems), two examples of digital literary gaming that need to be bought in order to be experienced by its readers/players.

Finally, a few conclusions on the Conclusion: in addition to summarizing Ensslin's predominant arguments on literary gaming, it also forecasts the book's strengths and weaknesses, an advised position which enables the author to predict future criticism on the L-L spectrum's fallibility in view of emergent forms of literary gaming, as well as future studies on similar subjects. An approach that also paves the way to further significant and com-plementary studies on literary gaming, allowing even closer relations between literary and game studies. For instance, "to examine literary gaming from the user's perspective", to "investigate, in particular, games that reference print culture metamedially", or, finally, to study the "creative agendas and pro-cesses" used by creators of digital literary-ludic artifacts (163-164).

Introducing literary gaming as a recent object of digital media studies, *Literary Gaming* presents a circumspect though significant step to showing that digital literary games combining both ludic mechanics and literariness have come of age. Despite large differences between usual target audiences of the gaming industry and the niche literary gaming fans and critics represent, what Ensslin's book is able to show is that both game designers/ludologists and writers/literary scholars could take profit of what brings them together. On the grounds that, in a world increasingly divided by the phenom-enological clash between the instances of deep and hyper attention, whether we like it or not, it is all about play.