

Agata Waszkiewicz. *Metagames: Games about Games*. London: Routledge, 2024, 175 pp. ISBN 9781032615561.

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Popular culture responded to the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s with *Strange Days* (1995), *ExistenZ* (1999), and, most famously, *The Matrix* (1999). All three movies warned their viewers about technology-dependent alternative reality which, at the moment of early experiments with VR, seemed just behind the corner. Time has passed, the emergence of AI marked yet another pivotal point in humanity's experiments with technology, shedding new light on speculative fictions' fear of thinking machines (this time embodied by *Ex Machina*'s Ava rather than *The Terminator*'s T-800), and even though the technology that would allow complete immersion in a computer-generated world has not yet been perfected, its imperfect version is now part of the rapidly-developing gaming industry. Once accessible only as moving images on the silver screen, spectacular visions of (im)possible worlds can be now experienced by players equipped with hardware available at every electronic store. Numerous gameworlds tempt consumers with photorealistic visuals and, more importantly, engaging plots and round characters, for technological progress has affected the way the medium tells stories. Still, in spite of their indebtedness to the tenth muse, video games remain their own medium, one that is uniquely self-aware. On the one hand, in spite of developers' attempts at transparent immediacy, players rarely (if ever) forget that they are playing a game; on the other, neither do games. Agata Waszkiewicz's book *Metagames: Games about Games* investigates this unique connection between the player and the (metareferential) game.

The first chapter, "Fourth-wall breaking and the twofold play", opens with a discussion of metaleptic transgressions in digital games. Waszkiewicz divides them into four categories: one-directional, two-directional, twofold play, and a player-initiated fourth-wall breaks (21).¹ The first two categories differ in the extent of agency granted to the player. "While both acknowledge the player and their role in the game, the former does not permit them to participate in the very process of breaking the fourth wall, posing it as a narrative device that occurs outside of players' agency. On the other hand, the latter

¹ Parenthetical numbers refer to pages of the book.

positions players as instrumental in the act” (27). As an example of one-directional fourth-wall break, Waszkiewicz briefly discusses *The Stanley Parable*, where, in one of the game’s possible endings, the Narrator recognizes the player’s presence and addresses them directly. One of the most famous examples of a two-directional fourth-wall break mentioned by Waszkiewicz comes from *Metal Gear Solid*, where the player, in order to defeat the fiction-aware villain, needs to change the port to which their controller is plugged in. The notion of twofold play is a subtype of a two-directional fourth-wall break, introduced by Waszkiewicz in order to stress the emotional connection between the character and the player. Finally, player-initiated fourth-wall breaks occur when “the player’s emotions are strong enough to alter their reading and the experience of the game” (35). The analytical part of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of three games—*OneShot*, *Tearaway Unfolded*, and *Glitched*—that Waszkiewicz considers to be examples of twofold play. In all three games, characters address the player directly, creating an intimate, emotional connection between them and their game avatars.

Chapter 2, “Hypermediation and the hypervisible interface”, applies Bolter and Grusin’s idea of hypermediacy to the analysis of games that “emphasize and exaggerate their interfaces” (55). The first game discussed by Waszkiewicz is *Bury Me, My Love*—an interface game in which the player takes control of Majd, whose wife Nour has left Syria and is seeking asylum in Germany. The entire game revolves around text messages exchanged between the player-husband and Nour. Although the game does not include fiction-aware characters, Waszkiewicz considers it an interesting example of fourth-wall breaking, as the reality of the game, especially when experienced in a real-time mode on a smartphone, interacts with the extra-diegetic space occupied by the player (as, for instance, message notifications). The second game discussed in the chapter is *Pony Island*. Instead of breaking (or blurring) the fourth wall, the game draws the player’s attention to the fact that they are playing a game. Waszkiewicz argues that numerous hypermediated interfaces the player is allowed to interact with, glitches disturbing the flow of the game, and several embedded games available throughout the gameplay are metareferential devices that experiment with the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic levels.

Chapter 3, “Unreliable narrator and the playable exaggeration”, investigates instances of narrators whose unreliable stories affect the gameworld. After a brief discussion of the notion of the unreliable narrator in literary studies, Waszkiewicz proposes her own typology of unreliable narrators in video games. She argues that 1) the narrator can be either a player or a non-player character; 2) they can be either representing (faithfully describing reality) or stipulating (influencing the world they narrate); and 3) there may be different reasons behind the narrator’s unreliability (77). In her discussion of the most notable (and thus well-researched) games with unreliable, stipulating narrators Waszkiewicz introduces the notion of a “playable exaggeration”, which resolves the seemingly paradoxical juxtaposition of ludic elements and a strictly literary device: “by telling a story, either due to the character being prone to lying or due to the (hidden) agenda they might have, [unreliable narrators] create a *playable exaggeration*, allowing the players to interact with

the world that has been altered or fully shaped by a lie” (77). The second part of the chapter analyzes *King’s Quest*—a point-and-click adventure game in which the game-world experienced by the player (controlling a younger self of the narrator) is gradually affected by the progressing dementia of the narrator.

Chapter 4, “Abusive game design and masocore games”, discusses games that are not meant to be “fun” to play. Although it recognizes the fact that in the case of some AAA productions it is the narrative that discomfits the player, the chapter’s primary focus falls on independent games that utilize their design to abuse the player. Waszkiewicz’s first analytical example juxtaposes *The Stanley Parable* and *Narrator is a Dick*. In both games, the narrator is an unreliable source of information, often misleading the player, which, according to Waszkiewicz, makes them villains (104). The second part of the chapter focuses on masocore games—games with “extremely high levels of difficulty that stem from the unpredictability of the level design” (107)—and considers them a somewhat curious example of metagames. By making their difficulty the most noticeable aspect of gameplay, such games comment on in-game failure. Finally, Waszkiewicz argues that “by restricting the player’s freedom and putting severe constraints on the play” (111) games such as *Mighty Jill Off* or *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* create an emotional bond between the player and the character, for the player becomes invested in an extremely difficult journey of their avatar.

In chapter 5, “Fragmentation and mini-games”, Waszkiewicz claims that numerous instances of fragmented play “are purposefully and blatantly playing with the expectations of the genre and are considered tools of challenging the boundaries of the medium” (117). First, the author discusses the defamiliarizing effect of glitch-alikes (purposeful disruptions of gameplay) which may serve numerous functions: for instance, they expose the materiality of the medium or signal a transition from one diegetic level to another. Second, Waszkiewicz focuses on the visual fragmentation of such games as *Genesis Noir* and *Layers of Fear 2*. The former toys with the player’s expectations regarding gameplay rules and animation, whereas the latter uses its fragmented aesthetic to intensify the emotional effect of a horror story. Finally, Waszkiewicz turns their attention to ludic fragmentation caused by embedded games. Having provided a typology of different types of games-within-a-game, they discuss *The Hex*—a game in which the player travels between different diegetic levels represented as embedded games—and *dys4ia*—a short autobiographical game consisting of several mini-games which metaphorically represent the experience of hormone replacement therapy of a transgender woman.

Chapter 6, “Parody and the edges of metagames”, discusses games that “rely on the player’s familiarity with the mechanics, level design, and the tropes of famous games” (149). Waszkiewicz distinguishes between two types of parody in video games: one that references a particular game and one that focuses on a specific game mechanic. According to them, an interesting instance of parody are cozy games and walking simulators that completely reverse the mechanics of action-adventure games. The analytical part of the chapter focuses on two games, both of which apply numerous strategies already explored

in the book. Whereas *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* seasons its gameplay with everything, “from hypermediated interfaces to fiction-aware narrators, glitch-alike aesthetics, to the literal parody of other game titles and genres, offering a collage of genres and styles” (158), *The Magic Circle* creates “embedded metaleptic structures going from fiction to fictional player and fictional developer, framed by a mirrored relationship between the extra-fictional players and developers on the two ends of the game experience” (165).

Waszkiewicz’s book demonstrates that video games have extended the limits of what literary scholars tend to call metafiction. On the one hand, the titles discussed in *Metagames* utilize such well-known literary devices as fiction-aware characters or unreliable narrators, testifying to the increasing relevance of storytelling in the gaming industry. On the other, metareferentiality in video games takes into consideration ludic elements, bringing the player’s attention to the fact that they are experiencing a story via a particular medium. This blend of narrative and ludic self-awareness in most cases breaks the fourth wall, either directly or indirectly stressing the player’s unique position within metagames. Interestingly, some games discussed by Waszkiewicz also break the wall of academic objectivity, raised between the scholar and the object of their study through the application of rules of formal register (a suggestion to avoid personal pronouns being one of them). By addressing the player by name, games such as *OneShot*, when quoted by Waszkiewicz, insert them into the book as a unique player with a very personal reaction to the game. Thus, Waszkiewicz-the player becomes part of the game analyzed by Waszkiewicz-the scholar.

Another interesting point (suggested in *Metagames* but never explicitly voiced) may be made if one takes time to consider one of the book’s “glitches”. In the conclusion to Chapter 3, Waszkiewicz writes: “Unreliable narrators are one of the best analyzed meta devices in literature, and it is not exactly surprising that the same cannot be said about digital games” (94). The confusing double negative of the second part of the sentence makes the reader wonder about the reason behind the surprise. It is not the lack of criticism devoted to unreliable narrators in video games that one should find surprising but the relative absence of narrators in video games, the fact that Waszkiewicz themselves recognize (103). Interestingly, the narrators they analyze, similarly to most of the meta-devices discussed in *Metagames*, appear in independent games that never reach the same number of players as AAA games. Therefore, the absence of AAA games in Waszkiewicz’s study may be read as a testimony to the gaming industry’s conservative approach to storytelling. In their pursuit of increasingly photorealistic virtual environments, facilitated by constant technological development, game developers seem reluctant to experiment with literary devices that disrupt the player’s immersion. As a result, games that utilize postmodern, defamiliarizing strategies discussed in Waszkiewicz’s book are the domain of creators who—due to limited resources—do not need to worry about immersion. It is true (and *Metagames* is the best proof of that) that there exist postmodern independent games, but contemporary AAA games seem rather metamodern in their search for affective engagement.

To conclude, *Metagames* is a well-researched and competently argued study of a literary device that has found its way to a rapidly-developing medium, and both literary and game scholars may find it interesting. It is also an implicit comment on the (ir)relevance of postmodernism as a cultural logic of late capitalism.

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