

**Kirsten Zierold. *Computerspielanalyse. Perspektivenstrukturen, Handlungsspielräume, moralische Implikationen*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011. 258 pp.**

The scholarly analysis of video games is one of the most innovative, original, and currently fastest growing area of the humanities. In less than ten years, game studies have emerged as a completely new interdisciplinary field of research, one that draws on literary criticism as well as on social sciences, art history, computer sciences, or psychology. Meanwhile, back in the real world its object of research is rapidly developing into the globally dominating medium of entertainment, growing economically as well as artistically. This makes it all the more regrettable that particularly German-based studies on the topic of games are still largely caught in a loop of self-justification and the desire to continuously start from scratch. On the one hand, a lot of energy is unnecessarily spent to prove that games are a legitimate object of analysis, and on the other hand each new study seems bent on reinventing the wheel by going back to the fundamental questions instead of building on what is already given. The work under review, Kirsten Zierold's *Computerspielanalyse*, already carries this fundamental claim in its title, though the subtitle *Perspektivenstrukturen, Handlungs-spielräume, moralische Implikationen* qualifies this somewhat.

Zierold's study starts out by dealing with the "mediality" of digital games in two different ways: First she produces another contribution to the ongoing debate about the boundaries of the "ludic" and the "narrative" in games, as well as their relations. For this she uses Siegfried J. Schmidt's "Medienkompaktbegriff" as well as the concept of the "medial form" to come to the conclusion "dass digitale Spiele als Medien zwar grundsätzlich ludisch angelegt sind, in den meisten Fällen jedoch auch auf ein narratives Formenrepertoire zurückgreifen" (48). This leads her to define the ludic as free of moral concerns and the narrative as making moral statements ("Setzungen"). In the next step, digital games are depicted as "performative narrative spaces" ("performative Erzählräume") which include the "Bild- bzw. Räumlichkeit," the staging ("Inszenierung") of narrative and their modes of performativity ("Performativitätsmodi"). Zierold describes the "video game image" (the visual level that the player is presented with by the game) as primarily a self-reflective sign, one that mainly refers to its own manipulability, which again means that moral categories are not applicable. In her analysis of the staging of narratives she very sensibly concentrates on the structural element of the "quest," though her idea of it lacks precision. For it is exactly this element that would allow to approach the integration of rule structures and semantic charging, since "quests" are valorisation rules that are communicated (sometimes exclusively) in terms of the game's semantized representational level.

In a last step of the theoretical part, Zierold adapts the communication model of literary texts following Espen Aarseth's suggestions for what he called "ergodic" texts and develops her own "Modell der Kommunikationsbedingungen in digitalen Spielen." The main difference to the earlier model is the substitution of the narrator with an "intrigant," an agent that provides the player with objectives and obstacles on the way to these objectives. It still remains to be discussed, though, whether this in-trigant indeed completely replaces the narrator (Zierold here follows the position that visual media generally do not have a narrator), or whether this function is something that is added in the case of games.

Looking at the study as a whole, the two tendencies sketched above of self-justification and "fundamentalism" can be found in this work in the large space that it allows for laying out its theoretical foundations and the sheer number of different theories it draws on. This proliferation of theoretical backgrounds, impressive as it is, at times rather seems to hinder the study's development of original insights than to enhance them. The fact that this was originally a dissertation might have exacerbated the perceived need to make the analysis watertight through an excessive use of the-ories. Particularly noticeable is the disproportion (both quantitative and qualitative) between the theoretical part (pages 1-170) and the ensuing analytical part (pages 170-223). The elaborate theoretical groundwork hardly makes its presence felt in the analyses of specific games, making its practicability doubtful. Zierold's readings of three games (*Fahrenheit*, *Fable*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*) would have been perfectly readable without consulting the first part. The discrepancy is further enhanced by the attempt to switch to a more empirical method through the use of a "Spieletagebuch" from which the author quotes at length.

A second problem in methodology is the specific systematic location of her investigations of "moral" questions ("ethical" would probably have been more precise) with her general analysis of video games. While "moral implications" are only the third aspect cited in the subtitle, "Moral im Spiel" can be found at the top of each page as a short title for the whole study, and this inconsistency is reflected in the structure of the work. Morality as a category of analysis is announced repeatedly, but the results fall short of the expectations. Surely, investigating the ethical relevance of simulated actions is one of the great challenges of game studies, the most systematic attempt of which to date has been Miguel Sicart's *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009). A much more thorough reading of this work than Zierold offers would have been necessary, and thus the author fails to synthesize her intermediate findings, stating that games on the one hand are a space free of morality, while the reception of

fiction is ethically relevant. Part of the problem is that she omits to fully address the highly problematic nature of the second claim.

In conclusion, this is a work that fails in its extremely ambitious goals, though it does provide numerous aspects worthy of further consideration. It does provide further proof that video games, far from being merely "child's play," necessitate sophisticated analysis, even if it overshoots the goal in a way.

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