

Book review

Second person: Role-playing and story in games and playable media, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin

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[0.1] *Abstract*— Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. *Second person: Role-playing and story in games and playable media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. \$40 (408p) ISBN 978-0-262-08356-0. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0095>

[0.2] *Keywords*—Computer games; Game studies; New media; Playable media; Role-playing game; RPG; Video game

Kerr, John Finlay. 2009. *Second person: Role-playing and story in games and playable media*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin [book review]. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0095>.

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[1] *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2004), the collection preceding this present one (also edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan), was a vibrant discussion about the expressive potential of new media forms, and how any true electronic literature of this century is likely to be manifested as games: stories told in the first person through configurative acts. *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* is not a direct follow-up but a level up, an expansion. Unlike *First Person*, *Second Person* does not constrain itself to new media but extends the ideas of playable media more widely into other areas like role-playing game (RPG) narratives, collectible card games, improvised theater, hobby toys, and the stories told through and about all of those. *Second Person*, then, is about the role-playing "you" (the player-character) in these interactive narratives.

[2] Second-person gaming, in all its permutations—from the perennial *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974) to the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game *Uru* (Cyan Worlds, developer; Ubisoft, 2003)—is given the academic and critical attention it deserves as a phenomenon beyond the pure gaming aspect: game playing and storytelling overlapping and merging into something recognized as an amalgamation of

both systems. In this volume, the hobby game medium is given its due, acknowledging its formative influence on the wider digital gaming industry, and how it entwines with text adventure games and early multiform narratives (such as the once-popular Choose Your Own Adventure books).

[3] Fan fiction based on licensed tabletop games is sadly not addressed, but *Second Person* lays groundwork for this in its discussions of authorized spin-off novels of RPGs and their implications as jointly creative works (in particular the chapter by fantasy author George R. R. Martin); one essay by a schoolteacher, Sean Thorne, even documents using a live action role-playing (LARP) game—John Tynes's *Puppetland* (Hogshead, 1999)—in classrooms to fuel creative writing. But this is almost beside the point: *Second Person* is about writing our own stories into existence through popular gaming properties, or at least preconfigured rules, and in this way, they already hint toward the transformational, the playful appropriation of content and components.

[4] In fact, fans taking their favorite game systems and adapting them could be seen as a subgenre of transformational texts, as of course could games that other fandom sources have been transposed onto, like making a game of the TV show *Supernatural* (2005–present) from an existing RPG system. That is, both subject matter and mechanics can be redesigned as fan-made works. *Second Person* discusses some of the independent scene that has arisen in RPG design since Wizards of the Coast (a major publisher and division of Hasbro) opened up its signature *d20*, or 20-sided polyhedral die, system for others to use (note 1). There is also an article by hobbyist indie designer Paul Czege, whose *My Life With Master* (Half Meme Press, 2003) emphasizes the *protagonism*, or personality, of the character from the get-go. This is in contrast to the traditional approach, whereby identification forms across time at the roll of a die. Czege discusses how (and why) he innovatively uses the main character's inner life as an implemental part of game mechanics.

[5] These smaller cult designers seem to be bigger on story, perhaps because this is the only way in which to compete, or because these are largely labors of love, or both. In *Second Person*, Greg Costikyan refers to these designers as being from the gamist-narrativist-simulationist approach (established by Ron Edwards). While this would appear to support the best of everything, Costikyan criticizes their focus on narrative, and their conviction that game play and storytelling are not inimical. Thus the unavoidable argument between ludologists and narrativists rears its Janus head in *Second Person*.

[6] Ludologists claim that games and story are separate things, in and of themselves; narrativists claim that games are a form of narrative. While I agree that games do not require a narratological approach to legitimize them as objects of study, the connection between game play and storytelling is self-evident. In fact, the debate

has become wearisome; Janet H. Murray (2005) herself—regarded by many as one of the most influential women in games—has called for an end of the schism. Anyone who thinks that the unique constraints of game play cannot possibly be used to best structure a story has probably not encountered *Braid* (Jonathan Blow, developer; Number None Inc., 2008), which marries pure mechanics and story into a philosophical platform. Narrative in games is no longer confined to the clunky cinematics of the arcade game *Dragon's Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, developer; Cinematronics, 1983), and regardless, narrative is more in what we bring to games: the stories we instill, the ways in which we play. There are people who fondly remember their virtual pets from the 1990s, and Steve Meretzky's chapter about Floyd (from the game *Planetfall*, Infocom, 1983) details the emotional effect that that doomed little robot had on players, which set the benchmark for richly developed characters who can drive a game's narrative.

[7] Part and parcel of this argument are the definitions of game, and which one works best. It seems oddly fitting that the definitions of game can be negotiable and have exigencies, like games themselves. *Second Person* favors the narratological side but never fully reconciles the old game/story debate one way or the other. Or rather, while the individual jurors may have decided, the jury itself is still out. This is a huge advantage of *Second Person*: the dialog of responses, the debates we encounter, activating them as we read, from one essay to another. These are not direct rebuttals but the links and interconnections that we come to by ourselves as we make our way through the book.

[8] Reading *Second Person*—its gamut of varying voices and perspectives—is an individual experience. Praise for its predecessor compares it to a shining symposium, held in a vaulted auditorium (from the blurb, by Jay David Bolter, Wesley Professor of New Media, Georgia Institute of Technology). *Second Person* is more like what it describes: texts that are not hidebound. I actually found that *Second Person* resisted being read linearly. I preferred delving right into the thick of it, following branching arguments and using multiple bookmarks.

[9] One cannot judge (or review) a book by its cover, but it is safe to say that the sheer squareness of this book, the size and shape of its bindings, helps allow for this type of parallel processing: the dual columns, the scripts and extracts, the running commentaries—especially where the sidebars run onto second pages. Its effect in full is kaleidoscopic (although, of course, skillfully contained). Thus, I would imagine that most people's paths through the collection will be unique and nonlinear as well. Readers will dip in and out of various sections, make multiple passes, and then double back to check nothing has been missed, no paths skipped. In this, it is very much about *you*.

[10] This review, then, concentrates on the essays that are likely to be most relevant to you—the parts that are pertinent to fandoms, and about the transformative elements of playable media. It is impossible, in this space, to review each and every contributor to *Second Person*, because there are nearly 50. To pull out the individual arguments (and each essay is highly idiosyncratic, in length, form, and viewpoint) would require a review the same size as the book itself. But that is part of the structure of *Second Person*, its multiplicity of ideas. This is something to be excited about, and it literally invites us to come and play: RPG games are included in the appendix.

[11] Each contribution is clear and straightforward, like individual squares on a checkerboard. The contrasting voices are conversational, giving the same constructive sort of noise one expects from a game meet. There is a good balance of theoreticians and practitioners. Various, the contributors are renowned academics (including Marie-Laure Ryan and Lev Manovich), fiction writers (including John Tyne and Joe Scrimshaw), and designers (including Nick Fortugno, James Wallis, and Steve Meretzky) of both computer and tabletop games. This offers a healthy range of different viewpoints—from diametrically opposed vis-à-vis the issue of story versus game play to a combination of the two, the viewpoint I share. The book itself is divided usefully into three sections: one on paper-based RPG games, one on computer-based games, and one on their interactive and improvisational equivalents in the real world—that is, performed through live actions or as installation theater.

[12] One surprise presence is Kim Newman, which—because I'm a fan of his works, and the works *in* his works—came as a delight. Newman writes some of the best Wold Newton Universe stories, which involve putting new characters and old favorites into intertextual, cross-genre shared worlds that often transcend any one given form of literature. (Imagine Raymond Chandler meets Rudyard Kipling meets Bram Stoker meets Enid Blyton, with *Doctor Who* tie-ins and *Warhammer* RPG novelizations all folded in for good measure.) Newman's works are well worth the attention of die-hard fans of *being* fans; they are both highly literate and suffused with popular culture. Newman is also an academic in his own right. His chapter is an exegesis of his postmodern Choose Your Own Adventure-style novel, *Life's Lottery* (1999), and can be faulted only for being too humble and not doing justice to that book's inner games.

[13] George R. R. Martin (author of the epic *Song of Ice and Fire* series) is another fantasy writer featured. In *Second Person*, he gives a personal account of the close-knit RPG gaming culture that gave rise to his Wild Cards shared-world anthologies, 19 of which have been published to date since 1987, with 2 being released as electronic books. It makes for an appealing history and insight into the process, although I did

not find his "virus catalyst" for superhero powers to be quite the dam-buster of comic book conventions that Martin insists it to be.

[14] However, the inherently interesting point about the Wild Cards series is the issue of how well tabletop game stories might transfer to so-called normal fiction, and the trade-offs between what is most effective in each. Martin details the early debates between contributors and friends about whether to merely write up previous favorite adventures or to write entirely new material. In the end, the group adopts a happy medium in which their own fictions play toward an end goal, in a mosaic manner that best resembles the social climate of gaming through which the Wild Cards shared world came about.

[15] Similar challenges come to the fore in other creators' contributions, such as Lee Sheldon's account of adapting an Agatha Christie novel into a computer game. His essay makes a succinct but thought-provoking case for the usefulness of nonplayable characters (NPCs) when properly deployed as part of the overall story dynamic within the game play. He gives us a behind-the-scenes look at how the NPCs in this classic whodunit are designed to be played *with*. It also explains how the conventions of the story and restrictions of the game are actually advantageous to each other in translating a whodunit: how the "dark and stormy night" suits the confines of the game world, and how the investigation is well matched to the exploration format. The player is an amateur detective, and to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, the game's afoot.

[16] By contrast, video game designer Jordan Mechner provides a postmortem on *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (Ubisoft, 2003) that emphasizes the technical side of the production process, unabashedly driven by functions and privileging the practical over the storytelling, actually stating as a golden rule that "Story is not King" (112). As a gamer who loved the swords, sandals, and sorcery of *Prince of Persia*, this took me by surprise, although I should have expected no less from such a megacommercial mainstream success. Mechner provides an exposé of the industry's nuts and bolts, which—make no mistake—is still impressive, if somewhat deadened for all the dissection.

[17] In the second section of *Second Person*, computer games are discussed as being very much indebted to hobby games of the dice and pen-and-paper variety. They evolve out of tabletop role-playing, making full use of computational powers for calculating and simulating game worlds, and the encyclopedic, procedural power of computers to enable hypertextual storytelling. These are clear advantages, and they touch on the central concerns of writing. Of course, these tools, this technology, are also in our hands. Stuart Moulthrop writes that "most [artists] who move in this edgy space are amateurs, obsessives, and/or academics" (149), which probably involves

fans as well. Self-reflexively, the reader-writer culture includes the creators and designers, but it also implicates the players themselves: writing through interaction.

[18] Much of the second section critically analyzes the technical aspects, the writing and interactive tools: the programming. This includes Director 7, a program that creates cinematic hypertexts (discussed by Marie-Laure Ryan) and the Soft Cinema Project (introduced by Lev Manovich), which is simultaneously a database and an artistic movement. A computer language designed for interactive storytelling (called "Deikto") by Chris Crawford is discussed, as is D. Fox Harrell's GRIOT narrative generation system. Flowcharts and scripts accompany these in sidebars, showing what they can achieve and showcasing passages from some of the results.

[19] One aspect of these essays that I found incongruous (and slightly discouraging) is how much it appears that this vibrant, lively new medium concentrates on death and bleak determinism. Themes included a dying man's flickering final thoughts, the loss of a child and consequent downfall of a family, murder mysteries, and vampire clans (which are awesome, but fatalistic). Not only is this theme downbeat, but it also almost seems like a hasty retreat from the fresh possibilities of the medium: a return to older, established ways of structuring narratives, with closure always smack at the forefront. It paradoxically also reinforces the (admittedly unfair) stigma that surrounds computer games as "killing simulators." Why must there be an end in the (gun) sights?

[20] Costikyan suggests early in *Second Person* that massively multiplayer online games are "devoid of story" (9) precisely because they are never-ending, but it is also possible to see this from the opposite direction: that the never-ending natures of *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) are already showing us it is possible to have stories without the antiquated notions of closure. In this way, MMOs can only be devoid of story inasmuch as the real world is. The old published-word mentality that the story's over when the book is closed is perhaps vestigial, or at least no longer necessary. The story can carry on, even when we're not there—while we're sleeping, working, or going about our daily lives. The story world does not stop turning because it is a shared process of storytelling through play, and there are many players.

[21] Singular second-person games of course lack these communities of play, that social element to give them a kick. The final section of *Second Person* thus feeds back into the real world again, in pursuit of that live factor, that human contribution. It loops right back into RPGs, rerouting the technology through performance and LARPs and the social aspects of gaming communities online. The pursuit of interactive story—now digitally equipped and cyberenabled—returns to the world, the organic. Inherent in this, and of interest to fans, is how tabletop games, computer games, and new ways

of storytelling all fold into each other. What does this hold in store for fans? Perhaps, in a paraphrasing of John F. Kennedy–style rhetoric, we should ask the opposite: what wonderful things to do fans have in store for playable media? The underlying message of *Second Person* leaves this open for you to decide.

Note

1. See *The Hypertext d20 SRD* (<http://www.d20srd.org/>) for information on the d20 system.

Works cited

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