Hanna Nicklin. *Writing for Games; Theory and Practice*. CRC Press, 2022. Pp. 300. Hardback £120.00, paperback £42.99, ebook £38.69 (hbk). ISBN: 9781032023069.

Writing in the video game industry is often confused with narrative design, explains the author of *Writing for Games,* Hanna Nicklin. However, writing and narrative design are concerned with different aspects of storytelling and involve a different set of skills. Narrative design develops landscapes, the actions possible to the player, the arrangement of levels and puzzles and, all in all, the story elements conveyed through other-than-words. Writing for games refers to what is strictly communicated through text and includes not only the story and dialogues, but also game menus, promotional content, and even collaboration with translation teams to market the game in other countries. This book intends to fill a gap in the existing literature, which has not paid as much attention to video game writing as to narrative design. In this volume, Nicklin sets out to provide the reader with the background knowledge—both in game development and literary theory—and the practical tools to develop their writing skills within the video game industry. The author's aim is to bridge the way into writing for video games for people that might be knowledgeable in video games but not in writing; in writing but not in video games; or a beginner in both fields.

*Writing for Games* is structured in three parts: Theory, Case Studies and Practice. "Part I, Theory" contains information about the video game industry and creative writing and is divided into 9 chapters. In chapter 1, writing is defined as a craft—a discipline perfected through practice and learning—and readers are invited to reflect on their aim at taking up this book; that is, whether they want to become a professional writer, an amateur one, or simple gain some knowledge about the field without necessarily practicing it. Some of the features specific to writing for games are also outlined but are further developed in later chapters. The next three chapters, that is, chapters 2, 3, and 4, are vocabulary chapters, structured as a glossary of terms. The point is both to allow the reader to easily navigate this section as a reference book and to clarify key concepts. Nicklin bestows great importance on communicating clearly, especially with people not specialised in writing. A writer in a video game company will have to collaborate closely with colleagues who might

not be familiar with storytelling, so one will need to communicate effectively and also be able to explain storytelling concepts. Similarly, the writer might not be too familiar with game development. Therefore, chapter 2 explains the basics of the game development process and the roles carried out by each likely team member, although the author warns that a team size can vary considerably and roles could overlap. Chapter 3 concerns itself with story structure and begins by explaining traditional divisions in acts derived from drama or film. However, these divisions present certain shortcomings when applied to games that have over one hundred hours of gameplay and/or follow several different storylines. Therefore, Nicklin suggests other storytelling structures derived from media ranging from promenade performance to TV shows in order to complement the writer's resources. In chapter 4, story components such as plot, genre, form, or literary devices for audio visual media are explained with relation to the video game format. All in all, the aim of these chapters is to clarify concepts, not only to fill possible gaps in the reader's knowledge, but also to facilitate cross-disciplinary communication.

Chapter 5 departs from general concepts around writing and storytelling to close in on the specifics of writing for video games. Nicklin makes the reader aware of the differences between writing text that is to be read on screen and writing with the intention of text to be spoken by an actor. She also explains the goals writing should achieve in a game, and gaming-specific writing formats useful not only for the product itself, but also for the development process such as work-progress tracking documents. In chapter 6, the reader is invited to reflect on how the artistic medium affects the storytelling and discusses transferable skills that she herself has learnt from unexpected artforms such as dance or ceramics. The last three chapters in "Part I" are shorter, and intended as an introduction to more specific aspects of the industry and writing that the reader might be interested in: chapter 7 contains ideas specifically on comedy writing; chapter 8 presents a short list of bibliographical notes for further reading; and chapter 9 delves briefly into ethics and the gaming industry, both in terms of advocation and representation, and in terms of the well-being of the worker in an industry in which certain forms of exploitation are infamously normalized.

Throughout "Part I," Nicklin keeps a non-expert audience in mind, and so invites the reader to skip sections with which certain readers might already be familiar. Moreover, *Writing for Games* favours covering a wide variety of topics over exhaustive explorations, offering instead further suggested readings when appropriate. However, this does not mean that the author avoids currently contested issues just to focus on foundational knowledge.

She still takes the opportunity to challenge what she considers orthodoxies in the gaming industry or revise concepts that tend to be used without a critical lens. One of these is the concept of immersion, which is casually understood as enjoyability and therefore desirable, and often thought to be inherent to a video game's interactive nature. She reminds the (prospective) game writer that immersion might, first of all, not always be a desirable effect. However, if immersion is the goal, then the writing and design of a game needs to be intentional about achieving immersion, it is not inherent to video games. Finally, immersion necessarily brings up questions about the expected player. More often than not, video games adopt the perspective of the hegemonic white, heterosexual, cisgender man and Nicklin reminds us that not all identities can slip as easily into immersion—that is, self-effacing identification—with this character. The author invites the reader to think critically about who is being centred as the video game is created and how the audience is expected to interact with a video game's characters (in the case that the video has characters).

Empathy and so-called empathy games are also relevant when talking about the ethics of game playing and game development. Nicklin positions herself against empathy games that offer a clear "correct" answer to the conflict at hand to, presumably, educate the player in the right course of action. She does not commune with the idea that games could be used to re-educate people—which Nicklin likens to developing "coercion machines" (75). Instead, she cites Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht as inspiration for devising games that advocate for change. She prefers to introduce ethics into gaming by creating complex situations presented from different perspectives so that the player may ponder on them and draw their own conclusions.

The concept of agency is another example of a currently contested issue that Nicklin introduces in her book. In the wake of ever more complex games offering several different plot points—especially several endings—depending on the player's decisions along the way, she positions agency in a continuum with authorship. Whereas a game that offers a lot of agency is inviting the player to create their own story, a game closer to the authorship end keeps a tighter hold on the course of action to convey a given story. Nicklin explains that neither is desirable over the other, it is rather a matter of what the desired effect is in creating a given video game and what the best approach to achieve it is.

"Part II, Case Studies" analyses three games, one per chapter. Each chapter includes a section of key takeaways and further readings along with the analysis of the relevant aspect of the game. After an introductory chapter

10, chapter 11 explores character design through dialogue in *Life is Strange 2.* In chapter 12, *80 Days* is selected as an example of ethical decisions behind the readaptation of the colonially inflected novel *Around the World in 80 Days.* Chapter 13 is concerned with using well-known formats, in this case "the heist" format, to give the player a frame of reference to understand the story. This allows the game designers to give less information, already provided implicitly by the heist format, and add dynamism in a game with interweaving story arches.

Finally, "Part III, A Practical Workbook" is a collection of writing exercises accompanied with explanations and detailed suggested solutions for the reader to hone their skills. Chapter 14 invites the reader one more time to reflect on the way one learns, works, and even the way one reflects the best, as an essential part of the learning process. After that, chapters 15, 16, and 17 contain the tools and exercises for starting, developing, and finishing a story respectively. This section is especially useful to the (prospective) professional writer, as it teaches strategies to write and be creative while keeping to a specific brief and deadlines, as is usually the case in a video game company. The book ends with a conclusion, a glossary, bibliography, and an index.

*Writing for Games* is, therefore, a didactic handbook on creative writing skills for video game storytelling. Hanna Nicklin, who holds a PhD in games-influenced theatre and theatre-influenced games as a political practice, draws her experience from a long and varied career within the performing arts and playwrighting, as well as game writer and narrative designer, and finally as CEO at the video game company Die Gute Fabrik. As stated in the conclusion to this book, her motivation for writing was to share her cross-disciplinary experience with potential mentees that have reached out to her over the years but whom she had to turn down. The mentoring spirit behind this book informs not only its content but also its structure and style. In terms of structure, all chapters presented above have many subsections, all of them included in its thorough table of contents for easy navigation. In a fashion often reminiscent of gamebooks, Nicklin advises readers of the forthcoming content and encourages them to skip ahead to sections that might interest them the most. In terms of style, the author addresses the reader directly, using conversational language, cracking a joke or two along the way, and making intimations about her own experience as a writer in particular and as a learner in general. These structural and stylistic decisions resonate with one of the main propositions of this volume: the author is offering here the product of her own experience—her own writer's toolbox—but the reader should take her advice, try her methods, and keep, alter, or discard them as fits their needs;

that is, develop their own toolbox. Therefore, the book is not presented as a unit to be read in a linear fashion, cover to cover, but as a tool in and of itself to be used as best suits the reader. Similarly, Nicklin's approachable tone invites us to read her as the experienced mentor she intends to be in this book, but one that we can disagree with, rather than as an authority whose guidelines we must obey.

*Writing for Games* fulfils its aim as creative writing manual and introduction to the video game industry. It fills a gap in the current literature by focusing on the writing aspects of video game development, while also offering general information, an introduction to literary theory, and practical exercises. This volume manages to be a useful educational tool for writers at different levels of expertise while also contributing to topics of a more theoretical strand, such as the concept of immersion, the role of empathy games, or ethics and representation in media.

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