THE CHILD IN VIDEOGAMES:
FROM THE MEEK, TO THE MIGHTY, TO THE MONSTROUS

Reay, E. (2023). *The child in video games: From the meek, to the mighty, to the monstrous*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Zsófia Orosz-Réti

The medium of digital games, once dismissed as mere child's play, has matured alongside the academic discipline of game studies. This newfound maturity allows for a deeper look at the medium's own role in conceptualizing childhood and childness, as explored in Emma Reay's recent book, *Children in video games: From the meek, to the mighty, to the monstrous.* Reay, a senior lecturer at the University of Southampton, UK, distills years of her research in the volume, highlighting the potential of in-game child characters to reflect on how we generally theorise children, but also to comment upon the medium's fantasies, mechanics and affordances, in addition to underlying assumptions of gender, heroism or affect in playing. For the author, the analysis of child characters bears a similarly subversive potential to playing for play's sake – which is often associated with childhood.

The general approach that the book undertakes is one of continuous destabilization: that of rigid taxonomies (even the author's own), fatigued narrative arches, or conceptualizations of the terms that the volume works with: "the medium poses a real threat to the age-based organisation of society. Viewed this way, it seems the reactionaries are right: videogames are ruining childhood – and, by extension, they are destroying its conceptual foil, adulthood" (p. 14). In addition, the book also destabilizes disciplinary borders as Reay consciously positions her work within the interdisciplinary nexus of game studies and children's literature studies.

Following the introductory first part, the second chapter of the book establishes the robust research that constitutes the basis of the argument: Reay conducted a content analysis of almost 600 digital games from 2009 to 2019 and surveyed all the child characters present in them. The way she enters a dialogue with her data is nothing short of fascinating, as she manages to draw meaningful conclusions even from the tiniest observations pertaining to quantitative data. This is where the author presents her taxonomy of seven archetypes, some of which are then explored at length in the analytical chapters: the Inner Child defined by a "nostalgic appeal" (p. 44), the Mighty Child advocating a new kind of unheroic heroism, the Side Kid – the typical sidekick doubling as a moral compass, the Human Becoming of flashback scenes, the Child Sacrifice whose death justifies the player character's actions, the Waif – an ambiguous, eerie childlike character, and finally the Little Monster, a grotesque and repulsive antagonist who needs to be banished.

Additionally, the author introduces her mix of methodologies including the aforementioned content analysis, which is paired with insightful close readings and her unique method of *critical ekphrasis,* an autoethnographical approach to playing, where she would, after playing, "immediately write a short prose anecdote detailing [her] experience of this playthrough, using figurative language that attempts to capture both the sense of my visceral, kinaesthetic, embodied reactions to the text and the expressive eloquence of the

game's non-verbal signifiers" (p. 50). And indeed, these short, personal accounts are used as points of focus and interventions, or as tools for the elegant conceits and analogies that structure the argumentation. Such research and writing method not only renders the text "vulnerable, passionate, hesitant and human" (p. 215), but also accounts for the situated, contextual, unique experience of play – matching the non-hegemonic identity constructions that child characters tend to enact. The writing, along with being rigorous in exploring its academic sources and working on a *mighty*, even *monstrous* corpus, never ceases to be playful in making use of creative puns and unconventional logical juxtapositions – or an overarching structure that is always open to diversions that will ultimately still contribute to the big picture.

Chapter 3, with the comparative analysis of *Inside* (Playdead, 2016) and *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), taps into the cultural history of childhood and offers one of the major contributions of the book: "My intention is to suggest that although 'the child' seems fixed in its contemporary mould – solidified by medical, legal, educational, and commercial pressures – the immateriality of videogames offers us opportunities to remix the meanings of the physical signifiers of age and experiment with new assemblages of childhood" (p. 63). While *Detroit: Become Human*, Reay argues, conceptualizes 'the child' by its neediness and "capacity for suffering" (p. 82), *Inside* relies on the immateriality of the medium to "create space for question" (p. 85).

The following four chapters map out the four main fields of inquiries that tend to arise whenever it comes to children – all paired up with the relevant archetypes from Reay's initial taxonomy. In chapter 4, "Child-killers and killer children", children's agency is discussed in relation to two categories, that of the Little Monster and the Waif. The author suggests that the ambiguous Waif, loiters "between 'helpless' and 'harmful', troubling the adult world with its baleful, mournful vacillation" (p. 94). Based on Fisher's (2016) take on eeriness as excess agency, Reay contends that the reason why child characters falling into these categories may be perceived as unsettling is precisely because of their agentic nature. The last part of the chapter offers an inspired parallel close reading of two very similar games, *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017) and, once again, *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010). It ultimately tackles questions that any player of these games might find uncomfortable, such as the suspicious interchangeability of loving and controlling someone.

Another trope that defines discourse about children is how they are the hopes for the future, resonating with the archetype of the Mighty Child. Although the child characters that fall into this category do things that shape the world, for Reay, there is "something fundamentally *unheroic* about these children" (p. 124) – that being their capacity for vulnerability, connectedness, interrelational identity, and for cooperation. The chapter offers alternative routes to becoming a hero instead of Campbell's (1949) traditional 'hero's journey' template, which is rooted in the practice of sorting the world into binary oppositions and single-handedly saving/colonizing those on the other side of the dichotomies. According to Reay, in some examples from her corpus, "rather than experiencing the world from the perspective of an exceptional individual whose heroism is an innate, essential quality, players experience 'being a hero' as a relational force that exists between agents and is a product of these agents' need for one another" (p. 131).

In addition to the questions of children with agency and their being capable of shaping the future, children are generally framed in a discourse of cuteness. Hence, chapter 6, informed partly by cute studies, turns towards the archetype of the Inner Child and virtual performances of childhood and nostalgia. The chapter engages with two of the most significant implicit theoretical underpinnings of the entire book, namely, the relationship between the adult player and the child player character and the materiality, even tactility

of play in a digital playground. By extension, the argument also has a more philosophical dimension pertaining to nostalgic play and the fantasy of childhood that is often akin to that of play. Reay here suggests looking at childly perspective as "a poetic device that reawakens players both to the beauty of the subject matter and to the artistry of its technical composition" (p. 170) and combines the perceived sanctity of the magic circle – "the idea that play takes place within a separate, symbolic realm that exists outside of ordinary experience" (p. 181) with the spatiality of childhood.

The final analytical chapter, "The kid in the fridge", draws on one final recurring theme about childhood, that of the vulnerability of the child by looking at the archetype of the Sacrificial Child – one whose death is transformative for the hero. The chapter expands the trope of the fridged wife, a character deliberately written for the sole purpose of being violently murdered early on in the narrative, to that of the fridged kid. Reay maintains that "the central function of the sacrificial child is to resolve ludonarrative dissonance by framing the hero's homicidal actions as morally defensible" (p. 193). Deeply rooted in a gender studies perspective, the concluding part of the chapter explores the potential of the sacrificial child to set forth a sort of female heroism, but Reay ultimately suggests that while there might be female heroes like Kassandra of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018), *feminine* heroism, one that does not build on traits of conquest and violence, is nowhere to be seen.

The volume, while drawing an appealing and empowering arch in terms of agentic and even mighty children, nevertheless concludes with 'the child' and childhood both being dead. Surprisingly, the now iconic Kid in the Fridge, that of *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), is absent from Reay's corpus, nevertheless, we would like to close our review with this image. Originally an easter egg that nods to a wild idea in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Spielberg, 2008), *Fallout 4* has a side-quest where the player character can save Billie, a child who, ghoulified, manages to survive the atomic bomb and a further two hundred years stashed away in a fridge. Falling into many potential categories based on Reay's taxonomy (most notably the Waif or the Side Kid), Billie, despite his repulsive, skull-like appearance, does exhibit characteristic traits of childliness: needing help, protection and love. Interestingly, Reay suggests looking at certain Side Kid characters, like Ellie from *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) as 'anti-zombies' – reminding players and player characters to remain humans: "without a child, winning is outperforming and outlasting one's enemies; with a child, winning is safeguarding the child long enough and effectively enough for it to outlast you" (p. 35). Even as the child and by proxy, childhood is twisted and distorted, its potential to humanize, challenge, destabilize and innovate – the myth of childhood and the inherent promise of playing – still remains.

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Author of the review

Zsófia Orosz-Réti, Ph.D.
University of Debrecen
Faculty of Humanities
Egyetem Square 1
H-4032 Debrecen
HUNGARY
reti.zsofia@arts.unideb.hu