



VIDEOGAMES AND AGENCY

BÓDI, B.: *Videogames and Agency*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. 226 p. ISBN 978-1-003-29878-6.

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B. Bódi's *Videogames and Agency* emerges as a seminal work in the field of game studies, offering a profound exploration of how player actions are both afforded and restricted by game design. Its significance is rooted in a comprehensive approach that melds rigorous academic research with an accessible writing style, catering to a broad spectrum of readers, including scholars, students, and game designers. The book is notable for its synthesis of theoretical perspectives with practical insights from the gaming industry. The exploration of agency as an affordance, a concept deeply ingrained in the game developers' design ethos, bridges theoretical frameworks with real-world game design practices. This approach is pivotal in elucidating the intricate relationship between a game's production context, its design elements, and the resulting player agency.

The book offers a novel perspective on player freedom in digital games, a trend gaining prominence in the industry. It introduces a conceptual framework for understanding how designers articulate this freedom and reflect it in their design principles. B. Bódi delves into the dynamics of player agency, addressing crucial questions about the limitations and possibilities inherent in game design and their impact on the player's experience. Through case studies of both selected game titles, she illustrates a holistic approach that intertwines elements of game design, game studies, and game developer discourse, shedding light on the subtle facets of player agency and digital game aesthetics.

The Introduction sets the stage, underscoring the rapid technological advancements in the gaming industry and their influence on game design and player experiences. It references landmark titles such as *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020*¹, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*², and other franchises like *The Witcher*³, *Assassin's Creed*⁴, and *Red Dead Redemption*⁵, illustrating the industry's shift toward more player agency. This evolution is also evident in newer iterations of long-established franchises, like *Call of Duty*⁶ and *Metal Gear*⁷, which have adopted this paradigm shift. This context is crucial for comprehending the book's exploration of how designers conceive and implement player freedom in their games.

B. Bódi also addresses the interdisciplinary nature of game studies, emphasizing the significance of 'interactional expertise.' This term refers to the capacity to understand and discuss game design without being a practitioner. Leveraging this expertise, she offers

- 1 ASOBO STUDIO: *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2020*. [digital game]. Redmond, WA : Xbox Game Studios, 2020.
- 2 NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.
- 3 CD PROJEKT RED: *The Witcher (series)*. [digital game]. Warsaw : CD Projekt, 2007-2016.
- 4 UBISOFT MONTREAL et al.: *Assassin's Creed (series)*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2007-2023.
- 5 ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO: *Red Dead Redemption (series)*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2010-2018.
- 6 INFINITY WARD et al.: *Call of Duty (series)*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Activision, 2003-2023.
- 7 KONAMI: *Metal Gear (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo, Redmond, WA : Konami, Microsoft Game Studios, 1987-2018.

incisive insights into game design from both theoretical and non-practical standpoints, effectively bridging different research clusters within game studies, including education, humanities, social sciences, and computer science. Her methodological approach is two-fold: paratextual analysis to determine game studios' design ethos and textual analysis to scrutinize how games afford and limit player action. This dual strategy is essential for grasping the broader technological, economic, and socio-cultural contexts influencing decisions about player agency. The book's exploration of paratextual materials, such as digital marketing, developer blogs, and official websites, yields a comprehensive understanding of the game design process and its influencing factors.

The first two chapters lay the theoretical foundation. First one surveys game design and game studies literature to articulate a concept of agency, identifying common themes and viewpoints. Second chapter presents author's theoretical approach, delineating the dimensions in which player agency manifests, such as agency in space and time, customization options, and narrative control. This framework is crucial for the subsequent case studies, offering a lens through which practical aspects of game design can be analysed and understood.

The remaining chapters of the book provide in-depth case studies of well-known game studios creating avatar-based digital games. Each case study provides a distinct perspective on agency dimensions and their interplay. An analysis of Naughty Dog's *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*⁸ underscores the significant degree of designer control over player action, challenging traditional notions of player agency. It delves into the studio's design history and the evolution of the platforming genre, offering insights into the constraints and affordances on player action and how cinematic design influences agency.

The exploration of BioWare's *Mass Effect: Andromeda*⁹ presents a contrasting example, investigating how shifts in development teams, publishers, production pipelines, and technologies impact player agency. This study demonstrates how changes in a studio's design ethos and brand identity can significantly alter the player's experience and the game's design principles. It also argues that while Andromeda theoretically supports dramatic agency, it struggles to make emergent player stories feel eventful, ultimately failing to afford a high degree of dramatic agency.

The final case study examines System Era's *Astroneer*¹⁰, showcasing an alternative game design model and production context. As a title developed by former AAA developers who transitioned to independent game development, *Astroneer* represents a departure from the traditional AAA game design approach. This case study sheds light on the implications of independence in game development for player agency, particularly in the context of survival crafting sandbox games. The minimal constraints in such games make *Astroneer* a compelling example to conclude the book's exploration of player agency.

Overall, this book is a great contribution to game studies, offering a rich, multifaceted approach to the study of agency, examining its heuristic framework that distinguishes the spatial-explorative, temporal-ergodic, configurative-constructive, and narrative-dramatic dimensions of player action. B. Bódi's work stands out for its depth, clarity, and relevance, making it a must-read for anyone interested in the intricate relationship between game design, player interaction, and the evolving landscape of digital games. It could serve as starting point for researching a broader scale of titles and genres in order to fully understand the concept of player's freedom in games.

8 NAUGHTY DOG: *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2016.

9 BIOWARE: *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2017.

10 SYSTEM ERA SOFTWARE: *Astroneer*. [digital game]. Seattle, WA : System Era Softworks, 2019.

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