

# BOOK REVIEW: SECOND PERSON

PAT HARRIGAN AND NOAH WARDRIP-FRUIIN, EDS.

## AS A WORD OF ADVICE, WHEN

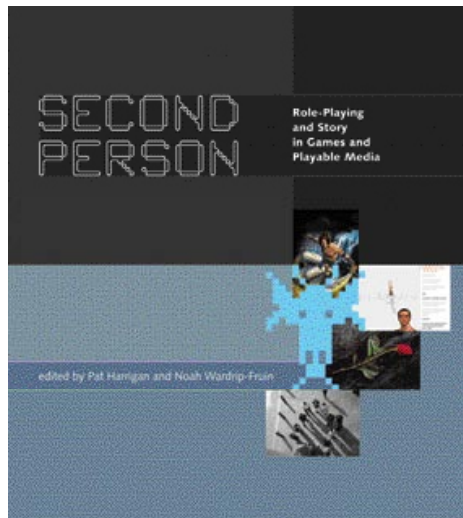
meeting a boyfriend's or girlfriend's parents for the first time, it's wise to stay away from the sticky subjects of art, politics, and religion. There are certain subjects that defy definition and unanimous agreement, and if the conversation ends up there, you know you're in for a long evening.

The topic of video game design falls squarely into that category: whether story is important to a video game, whether video game design is an art form, whether video games themselves can and should be studied and analyzed like DNA in a laboratory are all subjects ripe for heated discussion and debate.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the last is already a forgone conclusion. An emerging academic field, called ludology, analyzes video games from a social science and humanities perspective. The field of ludology invariably intertwines with the field of "narratology"—the analysis of the underlying structure of all narratives.

This leads to the main subject of a new book from The MIT Press called *Second Person*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. The title comes from the "you" (the second-person point of view) that is the player in a video game as well the person for whom the story is told. The book is a collection of articles by writers, scholars, artists, and game designers who examine story and role playing in various types of games, from tabletop role-playing games, to massively multiplayer games, to card games, and board games.

Researching the importance of story in video games, one discovers some interesting, extreme, and famous opinions. John Carmack, for example, the designer of *Doom* and *Quake*, is famously quoted as saying, "Story in a game is like story in a porn movie. It's expected to be



*Second Person* from The MIT Press [\$40].

there, but it's not that important."

A counterpoint to this view would be *Dungeons & Dragons*, the most role-playing and story-centric game of them all. Thirty-one years after its invention, *Dungeons & Dragons* is arguably the most popular and financially successful brand on the traditional game market today, and the story is the game.

Clearly, there's a range of successful games that cover the entire spectrum of story and role-playing. To argue that story is important or story is not important in video games is a moot discussion, on par with art, politics, and religion—and thankfully, that's not what *Second Person* tries to do.

The book is not 100 percent a how-to guide for designing better video games, but rather is a thought-provoker, spanning both the theoretical and the practical.

One memorable chapter is one in which Jordan Mechner recounts making Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. He shares both the technical and creative process of crafting the story and narrative elements. The chapter

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includes some great game design advice and 10 strict rules Ubisoft applied in making the game. Some of the more pertinent rules are:

- keep cinematic cut scenes brief, well-written, and tightly edited.
- story is important, but it is not king.
- gameplay is king, and story is only meant to support it.
- keep the story simple.
- screenwriting must be like programming: "Efficiency is a cardinal virtue."

Other contributors to the book include Greg Costikyan (Manifesto Games), Jane McGonigal (ILOVEBEEES), and Chris Crawford (organizer of the first Computer Game Developers' Conference, which later became the GDC).

For readers interested in a more academic study of video and non-video games and interactive fiction, *Second Person* is a must-read. For game industry professionals, the book is not for everyone, but it does contain very interesting chapters that may serve as little more than food for thought. ❖

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### STATS

The MIT Press

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