

Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; x + 208 pp, ISBN 978-0-230-23859-6, US\$29 (pbk), ISBN 978 0-230-23858-9, US\$85 (hbk).

Reviewed by: Jenny Arendholz, *Department of English Philology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany*

The author's summary will be used in advance: 'This book is intended as a first step in the direction of more focused research in all areas covered by it and beyond' (p. 160). With this statement on the last page, Astrid Ensslin refers to the discourse analytic study of videogames and gaming. Her volume campaigns for videogames to be firmly established as a legitimate field of scholarly research – after all, videogames contain 'communication and discourse processes' (p. 4) and are as such cultural artefacts worth studying (p. 3). *The Language of Gaming*, comprising 10 chapters (followed by end notes, a glossary, a comprehensive bibliography and a wide-ranging index), is a comparatively slim volume, wrapping up its content in only 160 pages. From a formal point of view, this introduction to the language of games and gaming is well-written, mostly descriptive and transparent in structure.

The introduction emphasizes the growing importance of an interdisciplinary study of (the) gaming (industry), claiming that 'a comprehensive, systemic study of the linguistic and multimodal discourses of videogames does not exist as yet' (p. 3). Accordingly, Ensslin proposes a very ambitious research agenda, that is, '[to examine] the way in which gamers interact and communicate, how they construct identities and communities

discursively and negotiate the meanings of videogames between them' (p. 4). Contrary to the straightforward title of her book, Ensslin clearly refrains from

contending that there is a single and unified language of videogames and gaming, [pointing out that] this book aims to identify and illustrate what seems to be typical, idiosyncratic [*sic*] lexical, morphological, pragmatic, conversational, multimodal and other discursive features and processes [...] of videogaming. (p. 7)

These goals find expression in eight research questions, leaving the reader wondering how this 'considerable undertaking' (p. 7) could possibly be covered satisfyingly in only 160 pages. Ensslin stresses that she intends 'to capture this phenomenon holistically [with] an eclectic approach' (p. 7). Her choice of games to be examined is survey-based and includes those 17 top-ranked videogames that most students should be familiar with and that have been researched before (e.g. *Tetris*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Mario Kart*). Additionally, the author compiled a 'paratext corpus' of written and spoken language samples. This GameCorp comprises 84 texts (280,716 words) and includes mostly videogame magazine articles.

The next two chapters are supposed to lay the theoretical and analytical groundwork. Chapter 2 lists 'types of discourse analysis' (p. 15), a loose assembly of concepts and approaches touching upon 'Competence and literacy', 'Genre and textuality' in a breath with 'Pragmatics' and 'Conversation Analysis', to name but a few. Chapter 3 instructively outlines 'some major commonalities between games and language which inspire a joint focus on how gaming operates interactionally and discursively' (p. 8) and refers to some approaches explaining the essence of games. Like Chapter 2, many attractive ideas are mentioned and provisionally explained, promising the reader deeper insights in chapters to come.

Chapter 4 explores the textual nature of games and deals with notions such as *inter-textuality*, *intermediality*, *transmediation* and *paratextuality*. Based on previous classifications, this strong and convincing chapter is full of examples and closes with the first of many case studies. The typology of videogames, a comprehensive list of genres with typical structural elements and examples, bears witness to the author's expertise and literacy in the field of gaming.

The subsequent chapter shifts to lexical and morphological characteristics of videogame discourse, delving into jargon, buddylect and techspeak. Ensslin's classification of word formation processes as well as her terminology might strike some linguists as odd (e.g. *clips* instead of *clippings*, pp. 69–70), sometimes even bordering on incorrect (her use of *stem* instead of *root*). Sadly, her observations remain atomistic and most of all context-deprived. The same holds for the following deliberations on metaphors. Chapter 5 also sees two case studies: a quantitative analysis of the GameCorp vocabulary reveals frequencies to be compared with keywords subsequently (with the British National Corpus as a reference corpus), and the chapter closes with a second case study about pronominal gender construction.

Chapter 6 is concerned with questions of pragmatics, among them speech acts and their grammatical manifestations. Elucidations on this matter are conclusive and accompanied by ample examples, showing that directives and representatives, but also expressives, are

dominant in videogame discourse. In a more superficial way, Ensslin also investigates deixis, reference and politeness. Especially the latter notion is ill-represented, however, as it is reduced to Lakoff's (1973) outdated model of politeness.

Subsequently, Chapter 7 targets the discourse of journalists, parents and politicians, etc., fathoming how gamer discourses are used to construct and perform group-specific identities and to express emotional engagement. Although the author identifies 'three discourses that are dominant in in-group gamer communication' (p. 108) – that is, the discourse of 'cool', fun and appreciation – her line of argumentation is blurry, lacking explanations and applications by means of examples and contexts. The case study retells the media coverage of *Grand Theft Auto*.

By far the longest and most convincing is the chapter about multimodality, linguicism, disembodiment and immersion, arguing that 'videogames call out to be analysed multimodally in the sense of how multiple representational modes displayed on screen create complex layers of meaning' (p. 118). Some results of (case) studies bear strong resemblance to previous relevant literature (see Crystal, 2006 [2001]; Herring, 2001) and some readers might disagree with a few rather bold interpretations of the data. Still, this chapter contains the most descriptive and valuable studies of the volume.

Chapter 9 identifies 'common narrative structures in videogames' (p. 143), asking how videogames construct fictional environments. Despite the fact that, at least from a linguistic point of view, Ensslin favors a rather unusual reading of the term *narrative*, the discussion of archetypal videogame plots, characters, space and the like is persuasive. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about the second half of the chapter, covering 'the niche phenomenon of fictional literary artgames' (p. 143), which remains hazy. After all, simply naming games cannot compensate for real, graspable examples – especially for newcomers to this topic. The exemplary analysis constitutes, however, a conciliatory wrap-up of the chapter.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, each of the eight initial questions is conscientiously matched with an answer. The glossary certainly is a useful feature of an introduction written for an interdisciplinary audience. After all, the back cover lists 'students of applied linguistics, videogame studies and media studies'. Although some basic linguistic notions are covered in footnotes and in the glossary (e.g. *token*, *morpheme*, *lexeme*), other central notions are sadly missing (e.g. *digital divide*, *linguicism*, *semantic prosody*). Further downsides concern some noticeable linguistic inaccuracies on the part of the author (e.g. *flaunting* instead of *flouting* a Gricean maxim, p. 27). As a result, videogame studies and linguistics interface only fragmentarily, which is why further research in this area is needed and encouraged by the author (see introductory quote earlier). Still, this introduction is full of original ideas and references to secondary (linguistic) literature, and most valuable when taken as a springboard and read as a source of inspiration for further in-depth studies.

References

- Crystal D (2006 [2001]) *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Herring SC (2001) Computer-mediated discourse. In: Schiffrin D, Tannen D and Hamilton HE (eds) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 612–634.
 Lakoff RT (1973) The logic of politeness: Minding your Ps and Qs. *Chicago Linguistics Society* 9: 292–305.