# KATHERINE ISBISTER (2016) *HOW GAMES MOVE US: EMOTION BY DESIGN*. CAMBRIDGE: MIT PRESS. ISBN: 978 0 262 03426 5.

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Games of all kinds, whether digital or not, are a present element of everybody's daily life. A game can start by counting the exact number of steps of a stairwell and thereby one already gets in touch with the fascinating interrelation between thinking and playing. Katherine Isbister's major interest thematises exactly this close connection of 'playing more thoughtfully and thinking more playfully' (2016: ix). Her latest work continues her series *Playful Thinking* that aims at pushing game studies in the light of discussion and reaching greater public attention and recognition. Having studied communication and human-computer interaction, Isbister's earlier works dealt with games and their influence on emotions and social connections. Throughout this informative and comprehensible work, the author argues for the necessity of accepting games as a serious and culture-shaping media form. The continuous focus of the book is to show and open the debate on how games can affect our lives and influence us as human beings. But does the author succeed in providing an intelligible introduction into game studies? And beyond that, does she give more than first insights into this topic? These are the central questions that will be dealt with in the following review.

On the very first page of her introduction, Isbister criticizes that beside other fields of study like literature, film and music, 'the public conversation around games isn't as nuanced and well informed […] as it *needs* to be' (1). In her opinion, a lack of education on games has led to a generally underdeveloped comprehension of games. What can be described as the author's convincing justification of her own topic, is the argument of the comparably equal number of sales that games share with books and films. But in contrast to games, there is, for example, a much more developed framework of knowledge about the different genres of film. Trying to bridge that gap, Isbister portrays the underestimated role of games in society and brings up an extensive number of examples that reveal the true potential of games as an important field of study.

Beside the intention to provide her readers with an overview of general knowledge about game studies, she pays particular attention to present new insights and new ways of thinking: 'At its heart, this is what Playful Thinking is all about: new ways of thinking about games and new ways of using games to think about the rest of the world' (x). In this vein, not trying to reach a particular target group, the book addresses anyone who is interested in approaching games theory. Playing games yourself is not necessary since playful elements and various kinds of randomly developing game situations frequently emerge in our daily lives and thereby serve as an entry into the topic of game theory. The two dominating perspectives are the 'player' and the 'game designer' whose interrelation is thoroughly considered throughout each of the four chapters. Situations of playing and gaming, with not only digital games under consideration, are easily accessible for the reader since several examples of well-known and non-digital childhood games are discussed in order to introduce various theories of game studies. Even more complex games are explained in detail and thereby simplified for understanding their contents, significances and characteristics. A rather simple level of language and a hesitation to use foreign and specialist terms might lead to frustration for more experienced readers with advanced background knowledge about games, but at the same time it enables the author to reach a wider audience.

Regarding another aspect of Isbister's style of writing, she tends to generalize who she is writing about by constantly using phraseologies like 'us' and 'we.' Unfortunately, she never goes into country-specific examinations that might be able to reveal the interesting and maybe extremely varying behaviors behind playing games. Which continents or countries are playing how much and in which ways? And why? Such situated questions remain unasked and therefore, an interesting approach to the topic, full of potential, is left out. Since every player encounters different conditions during the process of playing, the emotional outcome of a game can never be universal. Aspects like the player's nationality, religion or gender shape a personal experience. The game itself is always static, but a player's emotional perception remains individual. For example, the game *Pokémon GO,* which achieved worldwide attention in mid-2016, is played under significantly varying circumstances in some countries. In this game, one explores different places in real life and thereby tries to 'catch' creatures, called Pokémon, which are displayed on the screen of one's mobile device. In Iran for example, this game got banned for 'safety reasons'. However, some people

had already downloaded the *Pokémon GO* app, before it got withdrawn from circulation. This creates an entirely different gaming situation now that it has been prohibited. Playing that particular game, Iranian users have to now fear criminal persecution. What needs to be considered here is that gaming experiences are decisively influenced by the cultural environment of the players. Isbister's results thereby remain rather general and need to be understood as 'most frequent' while referring to the results of her experiments and examinations.

The rather easy entry into the book is also supported by the book's short length of 150 pages. Confirming the author's announcement of a generally comprehensible introduction into game studies, this work fulfills such expectations and beginners in game studies should not be too overwhelmed with new theoretical input. As well as returning to the book after leaving it aside for a while will not get its reader fully out of topic because Isbister regularly repeats the essential parts that were already dealt with. The work's structure appears quite reader-friendly with its four main chapters of almost equal length. One can observe a continuity in each of them. The author's method is to start by giving some key words and providing the reader with some important pieces of background information. These initial pieces of information are well-chosen and necessary to understand the following applications of game theories to precise examples of playing. Isbister then continues by choosing suitable games or gaming situations which are then connected to the already introduced theoretical approaches that have been explained at the beginning of the chapter.

The first chapter introduces the reader to two decisive theories of game studies that are called 'choice' and 'flow.' These two concepts mark the difference between games and all other types of media. Being the longest of the four chapters, it marks the central starting point for Isbister's examinations. It provides the reader with the work's most essential basics and the following three chapters will be based on it. As I noted above, Isbister continuously refers to the interrelation between players and game designers. In this chapter, she examines how game designers use 'choice' and 'flow' to trigger certain emotions of the player. The use of avatars, character customization and non-player characters in solo play situations enable game designers to impact the emotions of the players.

'Chance,' for example, displays the most fundamental difference between games and other kinds of media because players have the

chance to influence the outcome of a game through their own actions. In contrast to watching a film, one is able to immediately control what is happening. Isbister connects this ability of taking influence with an enhanced emotional response by the player. Being responsible for certain outcomes of a game can result in a variety of feelings like joy or anger. Referring to psychology researchers, Isbister points out that playing a game, and thereby having the possibility to choose and decide, leads to a higher brain activity than watching somebody else playing. Throughout this chapter, Isbister intends to point out why games distinguish themselves from all other forms of media: 'Yet in any medium other than games, we are only witnesses, not actors, and cannot affect the outcomes of the stories before us' (8).

By explaining the mechanics of the game *Train,* Isbister depicts how making one's own choices brings the player emotionally closer to the subject of a game. *Train is* a non-digital board game in which the players move a train full of passengers from one stop to another and thereby have to overcome different challenges. The final stop of the train is Auschwitz, but most of the players do not realize that until the end of the game. Isbister presents the feeling of 'complicity' as a frequently reported emotional response that is caused by the player's personal decisions throughout the gameplay. The fatal ending of the game intensifies the player's connection to the game, since he/she unknowingly, but nonetheless actively, participated in the crimes within the game. Unlike other types of media, games intensify the player's emotional experiences by letting them choose and decide.

The second chapter continues the theories from the first and develops them from solo to social play situations. Coordinated action, role-play and social situations are the three main design techniques that enable the player to experience group dynamics within a game. Initially, the author discusses the stereotype image of the isolated, addicted and antisocial gamer. She mentions the fact that most of the people playing digital games play together with others. Arguing against these prejudices, Isbister claims that games rather engage people socially.

The third chapter emphasizes the use of physical movement and the possibilities of the players' and the avatars' bodies to strengthen the emotional outcome of a game. Outside and inside a game, movement has the potential to enhance the intensity of playing. Far away from the aforementioned stereotype of the lonely player, who

sits at home and gets lost in looking at a screen, new and innovative ways of physical playing have been invented years ago. According to Isbister, movement of bodies has meanwhile become a key element of games. Expressing her personal recognition for game designers, she emphasizes the designers' intentions and efforts to increasingly include physical movement into the process of creating games. Amongst others, she mentions the game console Nintendo Wii, which was released in 2006. It represents one of the most popular examples for the incorporation of physical movement into the practice of playing. In games like *Wii Sports Boxing,* the player uses a controller, called Wii Remote, in order to experience an intense and digital version of a physical activity. The movement-tracking controller, which needs to be held by the player throughout the entire gameplay, transfers all movements to the game on the screen. Describing the boosting effect of physical movements in games, Isbister argues that this particular game 'encourages frenetic movement, which in turn creates a feeling of excitement and high energy in players' (77). That is to say, contributing a higher amount of physical effort to a game leads to an accordingly greater emotional response for the player. Later in the chapter, Isbister goes on by explaining three types of movement that are used by game designers in order to intensify the players' emotions and their social connection to a game.

The fourth chapter is about long-distance connection and networked play. In contrast to a play situation in which people play together in one room, networked play faces the challenge of overcoming long distances between players. Nevertheless, there are certain techniques that allow game designers to transport a variety of powerful emotions and thereby create social experiences and connections between people from different places around the world. Isbister presents the three methods that game designers use to produce vivid experiences for players of network games.

All four chapters are logically linked to each other and stick to a certain straightforwardness. The entire work follows a well-structured conclusiveness of arguments. At the same time, Isbister's standardized method of approaching various fields of game studies could be described as one of her work's weaknesses. What therefore needs to be reviewed more critically is the author's excessively one-dimensional method while explaining particular games and their emotional effect on the players. Too many times, Isbister does not go beyond presenting examples and opinions. Therefore, she does not succeed in developing the reasons why and how games are such

an influential type of media and why they deserve effort and attention equal to literature, music and other forms of media. Instead of using its own findings for a further development of examinations, this work remains on the level of an introductory listing of examples about games and their influence. Isbister quotes lots of players and critics reporting their experiences and giving their opinions on particular games. In many cases, these quotations lead to a monotonous reading experience because they are so lengthy and often seem to resemble each other. Beside the extensive number of examples, which are mostly described in great detail, many illustrations are used to describe particular games. For example, the game *Love Plus*, a Japanese dating simulation released on the Nintendo DS, receives five illustrations that cover almost two and a half pages of the book. The various images portray the game's three main characters, all of them female, in all kinds of different situations. Not each of these images proves useful and necessary, and fewer images would have been sufficient for grasping the author's thoughts on the game. Considering the book's rather narrow extent, the enormous quantity of details, illustrations and quoted remarks are too predominant in contrast to Isbister's actual theories of game studies.

The main criticism therefore concerns the book's missed chance of comparing the potential of games with the potential of other and already more recognized forms of media. Only once in chapter four does Isbister approach the idea of developing her results by referring them to another field of study. While discussing the interrelation between the player's identity inside and outside a networked game, she quotes Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT: 'Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices' (Turkle, 1995: 129). Thereby, Isbister stresses to what extent games might have effective influences on the player's real life, just as journeys enrich the anthropologist's cultural knowledge after travelling abroad. Especially for non-playing readers, this example portrays the power of games and it interestingly bridges a gap between the virtual and the real worlds. In contrast to most parts of the book, the focus of this approach is not on a detailed description of one particular game or the influence of game designers on players. With this example, Isbister outlines the true potential of games as 'an innovative medium that has a rightful place alongside the other media we value for their ability to reflect our own human experience back to us and for their capacity to take us into new emotional territory' (131).

What Isbister's work tries to do with its readers is to guide absolute beginners as well as fresh learners through an introduction to game studies. Its limited complexity allows a wide range of readerships easy access into this topic and the author succeeds in promoting game studies as a field of great potential and incomparable impact on people's everyday lives. Up to this point, *How Games Move Us* will be able to satisfy newcomers of game studies. There is a huge variety of games examples, so lots of readers should find some personal access to and interest in the book's content. At the same time, page after page loaded with numerous illustrations sometimes create the impression of 'page fillers' that do not support the work's theoretical argument. Besides, some interesting and more far-reaching theories remain undeveloped. This theoretical engagement would deepen some of Isbister's outlined thoughts and thereby motivate readers of a slightly advanced level of knowledge about game studies to think a few steps further. Nevertheless, this circumstance should be described as a missed opportunity rather than an obligatory necessity and it by no means belittles the work's convincing conclusiveness. Because of that, Isbister's book can be recommended to anybody who is interested in an appealing introduction into the field of game studies and still searches for a comprehensive and proper source.

**References**

Turkle. S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.* New York: Simon & Schuster.