

Review: *Of Floating Isles: On Growing Pains and Video Games*, by Kawika Guillermo. 2025. Arsenal Pulp Press. 247 pp.

Edoardo Bogni

University of Turin, Italy

Opening a book with the warning, “It’s dangerous to go alone! Take this,” a line directly taken from *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD, 1987), immediately provides the reader with an idea of how the author sees themselves and the intended purpose of their book. Kawika Guillermo’s (2025) *Of Floating Isles: On Growing Pains and Video Games* is both a memoir and a guidebook, virtually made for whomever can identify, even in a minutely, with the author’s identity—be it their ethnicity, gender, or their wide range of gaming habits. Guillermo’s work aligns with Gallagher’s (2019) conceptualization of ludobiography—a genre that examines auto/biographical instances of digital play to enrich our understanding of videogame history and the role of play in players’ lives. The book is a hybrid between an autobiography and a multi-themed essay on videogames, where various life events are connected to one or more specific games, and interrogates the “givens” of traditional autobiography through the lens of play. Throughout the book’s eleven chapters, the author recounts and revisits numerous painful or moving moments of their life, reflecting on ways in which their life’s journey could have changed for the best by making different choices at its crossroads. Guillermo’s work covers various scenarios, notably violence in deprived areas (Chapter 1, 2, and 3), depression (Chapter 4 and 5), being unhoused (Chapter 5 and 6), colonialism (Chapter 7), the Gamergate experience (Chapter 8), and mental and life-threatening illness (Chapter 9).

Guillermo presents their tale as a continuous and dark parallel between the games that shaped certain periods of their life and the events that happened during these times. The reader is encouraged to empathize with Guillermo as a narrative character in the same way that Guillermo, as a player, empathized with the videogame characters they encountered. This parallel highlights the affinities between the author’s life story, the game narratives, and the reader’s own experiences. In the introductory chapter, Guillermo highlights how experiences—both their

Press Start 2026 | Volume 12 | Issue 1

ISSN: 2055-8198

URL: <http://press-start.gla.ac.uk>



Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

own as the author and those of the reader—are inherently subjective. They illustrate this point by discussing *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), suggesting that personal background shapes how individuals engage with and interpret video games. In this game, the player takes the role of seven different versions of Red Riding Hood, who are each a different age and must avoid a different “wolf.” Each wolf represents a distinct fear, such as rape, womanhood, and adult disillusionment. Similarly, each chapter of Guillermo’s book explores a unique phase of the author’s life and a particular trauma or fear they experienced. Resultingly, *Of Floating Isles* can engage readers from diverse age groups and social backgrounds. For example, some readers might know how it feels to lose a friend in an accident, as told in Chapter 4, but might not understand the difficulties of being a mixed Asian kid in “the whitest big city in the United States” (p. 33).

Throughout the book, games are framed as collective experiences—shared with a sibling (Chapter 1), a friend (Chapter 4), or even an online stranger (Chapter 2). While Guillermo frequently highlights their unique identity, emphasizing differences in gender, ethnicity, and neurodiversity, these moments do not create distance with the reader. Instead, they enrich the book’s narrative by offering multiple points of connection. The universality of shared gaming experiences, such as playing alongside a friend as a beloved character, ultimately bridges any perceived gaps, allowing readers to focus on the similarities that transcend individual differences. The various types of games Guillermo and their brother played as kids, the online role-play chatrooms Guillermo frequented during adolescence, and the video games they played in Internet cafes through adulthood were a form of therapy and a way to rationalise the tragic events that were happening in the real world.

The author’s character grows as the book progresses, and Guillermo draws parallels between their life experiences and the games that best thematically summarize their life phases. For example, they write about Sonic and his friend Tails’ adventure in *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team, 1991) to reflect on their bond with their brother, Cameron; they discuss the impact of *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) on online gaming communities and the gaming industry to summarize the Gamergate and post-Gamergate era radicalisation; and they explore the pervading sense of unfairness when losing Aerith in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) and draw connections with the loss of a loved one in real life. The games are not just a means of escaping from the pain of life—ises, to borrow Guillermo’s phrasing—but also a system to interpret that grief, understand how to respond to it, and ultimately move on.

Guillermo uses the word “games” more than 500 times in this book. Nevertheless, the significance that this noun takes varies depending on the mood or the situation that the author describes. At times, Guillermo sees video games as a resource to cope with difficulties, other times he

views them as something to avoid in order to focus on more serious issues. The virtual world, which was once the author's only refuge, becomes an empty shell by the end of the book. It is nothing more than a "frivolous and childish" (p. 204) distraction from something terrible that was happening at the same time. Nevertheless, even when everything collapses, video games "ha[ve] equipped" (p. 207) the author with useful resources to overcome obstacles.

As previously stated, it makes sense that not everything in this book touches everyone equally. Though video games are a necessary parallel to understand the book, they are not analysed in depth. As Guillermo writes, games "are outlets to let out anger (*Overwatch*), to escape (*Paradise Killer*) . . . [they] g[i]ve new ways to understand trauma (*Subnautica*), illness (*Celeste*), and death itself (*Spiritfarer*)" (p. 205). Video games serve as an essential narrative tool in this book, allowing the author to deconstruct their own journey as the protagonist. Through this medium, Guillermo provides readers with the resources and perspectives they might need to navigate their personal struggles. Even the cruellest fictional worlds the author describes are nothing compared to the challenges that life offers. It is through this that the book reaches its conclusion with a terrible thematic descent, toying between a physical world's unbearable loss and two games about descending in dark, death-bound places: *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment 2018) and *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020).

In the end, the book is presented by the author not only as something they created to aid the reader, but also as a means to deal with every horror that pervaded their own life. *Of Floating Isles* is an insightful and original game-mediated essay on empathy. Although it is not intended to act as a scientific or academic text on psychology, social issues, or game studies, it provides valuable insights for researchers in these fields. It invites the reader to reflect on how games influence their relationships with others and, in doing so, not only proposes a different way of thinking about games, but also a different way of writing about them—one that blends critical reflection with personal experience. By highlighting moments of vulnerability, the text reminds the reader that game scholars are not only analysts of games, but also people who experience loss, crisis, and care in their lives.

References

Blizzard Entertainment (2016). *Overwatch* [Multiple platforms]. Activision Entertainment

Gallagher, R. (2019). The uses of ludobiography: Life writing and game studies. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019 Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*. <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1846>

Guillermo, K. (2025). *Of floating isles: On growing pains and video games*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Kaizen Game Works (2020). *Paradise killer* [Multiple platforms]. Fellow Traveller.

Nintendo EAD. (1987). *The legend of Zelda* [Nintendo Entertainment System]. Nintendo.

Sonic Team. (1991). *Sonic the hedgehog* [Sega Mega Drive]. Sega.

Square. (1997). *Final fantasy VII* [Multiple platforms]. Square.

Tale of Tales. (2009). *The path* [PC]. Tale of Tales.

Thorson, M. (2018). *Celeste* [Multiple platforms]. EXOK.

Thunder Lotus Games (2020). *Spiritfarer* [Multiple platforms]. Thunder Lotus Games.

Unknown Worlds Entertainment. (2018). *Subnautica* [Multiple platforms]. Unknown Worlds Entertainment.

Valve Corporation. (2000). *Counter-strike* [PC]. Valve Corporation.