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Book Review

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Abstract

A review of Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught's *Videogame Formalism. On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology*. Published by Amsterdam University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-9-048-55423-2, 264 pages.

Keywords

Aesthetics; game analysis; literary theory

Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught's *Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology* delivers exactly what the title promises. Published as a part of the Games and Play in Contemporary Society series from Amsterdam University Press, the book is part philosophy of science, part theory development, and part methodological framework. At roughly 250 pages length, there is enough room for exploring all three dimensions, and for demonstrating the necessity to deal with all of them. Formalist approaches to any medium, and especially to digital games, run the risk of appearing detached or solipsistic. Concentrating on the analysis of aesthetic coherence is antithetical to approaches that are player focused or based upon particular ideologies, which opens formalism up to all sorts of critique. As a result, most texts on formalism strive to address this criticism through a combination of arguing for the validity of the approach, demonstrating its theoretical consistency, and exemplifying its applicability—a difficult and uneasy compromise that is often quite apparent in this publication.

This inevitable challenge notwithstanding, Mitchell and van Vught deliver an important contribution to games research. Their book provides an encapsulation and demonstration of videogame formalism that is rather peerless in its scope and ambition, not the least because of the unusual collaboration it has emerged from. Based on the doctoral dissertation of one author and the career-long research of the other, the book distills two very different perspectives and creates a multifaceted, nuanced engagement with the subject matter. Beyond the customary introduction and conclusion, it is segmented into two initial, shorter chapters—an elaboration on what is meant by the "videogame form" and an overview of aesthetic theory applied to videogames—followed by two longer chapters that develop the methodology and demonstrate the application, respectively. Especially in the second half of the book, numerous screenshots from the analyzed examples support the written argument well, while there are no illustrations or diagrams to serve as visual aids for the theoretical part.

At its core, the book is an application of the Bordwell/Thomson school of neoformalist film analysis to digital games. However, film studies is merely a touchstone in terms of adaptation of fundamental tenets of Russian Formalism, which Mitchell and van Vught engage with at considerable length, digging much deeper than the by-now relatively frequent reference to ostranenie (i.e., alienation or defamiliarization). Thus, they provide a rarely found groundwork for close readings of digital games both in terms of the original theory and its following refinement and application outside its original arena. While similar approaches to close reading of digital games exist (which the book refers to throughout), none of them are this systematically argued for and at the same time exemplified through examples. While this is rather an innovation by degree rather than category, it is a significant contribution to object-focused games research.

The intensive engagement with the reception history of formalism makes the text somewhat demanding. The authors clearly expect their readers to bring a certain level of knowledge about literary and cultural theory. The intended target audience appears to be non-game scholars with prior knowledge of formalism, and game scholars or students who want to learn about formalism. Without either of those foundations, readers will not get much from the text; undergraduates may struggle to keep up and wish for a more systematically didacticized presentation of the analysis framework. Still, the book should appeal to both games researchers with film, literature, or media backgrounds, and researchers from those disciplines with an interest in digital games. Looking at the book on a per-chapter basis (which the publication format with individually indexed and bibliographed chapters implies), especially the method chapter would fit well into a humanistic game analysis curriculum.

For a quantitative or even qualitative social scientist, the book's method would probably not pass muster. That is not meant as a criticism, but rather to emphasize that the method developed here stands decidedly in the tradition of humanistic interpretation and criticism. The authors portray their approach as a heuristic towards a

poetics of games, which they want to differentiate from a hermeneutical approach based on a different research interest. This is a very subtle distinction typical of formalist thought, as is the very elaborate identification and elaboration of the recipient as a theoretical construct. Ultimately, the text does present a hermeneutics, and its method consists chiefly in exemplifying the central concepts that scaffold the critic's engagement with the game artifact. The authors take their most important concept from Kristin Thomson, the dominant. The dominant is the unified expression that results from the aesthetic alignment of elements of a work, and which can be observed when it is successfully realized and creates harmony, but also when it is subverted or underdeveloped and causes tension within the work. The authors further emphasize the need to reflect on the subject position of the player-critic, both in terms of the digital game in its cultural context and with regard to their (non-)adherence to implied player behavior. The relevance and relation of these concepts is argued for and demonstrated in example analyses, which allows the authors to not just argue for, but demonstrate the necessity to keep the methodological framework lightweight and flexible. By applying each concept to two examples analyzed individually by one of the authors, they illustrate that a contextualized formal analysis needs to be tailored to the example and the researcher. It is here, in the freedom and adaptability of a discrete number of analytic steps, that the academic rigor of the method lies. This would surely be even more apparent if the book had at some point distilled the framework into a bulleted list or a diagram to make its structure more obvious and easier to apply.

For an academic text, particularly one with several authors, the book is very readable. Some minor points of friction can be found, albeit mostly in a manner of tone, style, and attitude. Most pronounced is a struggle with pronouns that results from the co-authorship clashing with the method's call for an individual perspective. The authors address this challenge by shifting between first person plural and singular pronouns in the analytical sections. This creates clear distinctions with a clear purpose, but it could have been executed less granularly, thus improving readability without losing much precision.

One thing to note is a certain tendency to overuse references. The text is very well-sourced, and the first half of the book bases the authors' argument on other works almost to a fault. Their own line of reasoning is sometimes buried underneath a wealth of views from different and often contradictory positions. Many sources are not discussed as much as mentioned, and the authors often render harsh judgments or refer somewhat obliquely to very complex arguments made in the literature. There is nothing wrong with either of these practices, yet they are slightly at odds: the copious amount of further reading will be of benefit for readers less familiar with the subject matter and theory, which, however, might get the wrong impression of many sources that are treated very briefly or somewhat reductively. This is not a weakness per se, but is probably a necessary trade-off between the amount of literature and the degree to which the authors could engage with it.

Similarly, the authors are very careful in how they position their contribution to the field, and they characterize their formalist approach as peripheral to an implied "core game studies" discourse center. They characterize their work as interdisciplinary, located at the intersection of game studies, film studies, and literary theory. While this is an honest and meaningful positioning, it might make it somewhat difficult for more novice readers to initially assess how the approach presented here relates to more established analytical approaches that self-identify as originally game-derived—especially as there is limited engagement with other analysis frameworks (e.g., Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2019; Fernandez-Vara, 2019; Mäyrä, 2008). There are some puzzling omissions, given the explicit positioning of the volume, like the literary tradition of close reading digital games (Ensslin, 2023), and very peripheral treatment of other film-studies-influenced game analysis (e.g., Arsenault & Perron, 2008). Some of this is certainly due to the need to compress the much more extensive work the book was based on into the concise format, which also leads to a copious amount of self-citation of both authors.

This is particularly noteworthy because the authors take a very judgmental stance towards other formalist approaches. The introduction positions the book both scholarly and politically, trying to distance it from (especially) practitioners' prescriptive formalism. While this is necessary, the rhetoric of this contextualization strikes me as unnecessarily aggressive. One can disagree with e.g., Lantz and Koster without morally stigmatizing their approach because of perceived parallels to the #Gamergate movement. This combative stance is not just unnecessary, it also evokes an oppositional relationship within game studies and is suffused by value judgments that it otherwise argues against. The introduction seems almost desperate to distance the book from "hardliners" and repeatedly encourages readers to also consider broader perspectives, which strikes me as an unnecessary gesture.

Its small issues notwithstanding, Mitchell and van Vught's book provides an important demonstration of the relevance of formalist analysis in contemporary games research. The difficulty and academic heft of the text make it less useful for undergraduate students (with the potential exception, as noted before, of the method chapter as a standalone analysis guideline). For (post-)graduate students and more advanced scholars, the text will introduce and document a well-established analysis method and its foundational theories, as well as provide a broad overview of relevant sources. In other words, *Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology* very successfully lives up to its premise.

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