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Distance as a New Perspective and Approach to Digital Play

Fizek, Sonia. Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic. MIT Press, 2022. pp. 163.

With the rise of independent video games over the last few decades and the expansion of video game audiences, the variety of game genres, aesthetic styles, gameplay systems, and technologies continues to increase. As a result, what we call video games refers to various media with often quite distinct features that can include, for instance, both clicker games and animal simulator games.

In her book Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic, Sonia Fizek introduces the framework of mediated distance to understand the diverse experiences and aesthetics of playing video games. It is pointed out early in the prelude that the main and most popular approaches to video games have described them as “inherently interactive” and have attributed their significance to immersion, human agency, and direct control, referring to works by prominent game studies scholars such as Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, Eric Zimmerman, and Katie Salen (xi). This type of orientation around interactivity and the human player in control of the game, Fizek argues, reflects the “modern Western rhetoric of play as progress, power, and the self” while also neglecting the role of inaction as part of gameplay (xii). In response, she proposes ‘distance at play’ as a “medium- and matter-centric perspective” (xiv) instead of a human-centric one, and from this perspective, she aims to analyze different forms of distant play ranging from fully automated to spectated experiences.

The first chapter, “Beyond Interactivity,” presents not only Fizek’s own stance on the idea that the interaction, (the illusion) of freedom, and choices are what makes games more “gamey” but also

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how interactivity has been subjected to scrutiny by other scholars such as Lev Manovich and Brendan Keogh (3). This chapter also delves into the politics of placing control at the center of gameplay. Fizek refers to recent academic work exploring this topic, such as Melissa Kagen's Wandering Games, in order to demonstrate how the fantasies of "mastery over the system" of a game reflect a hypermasculine point of view:

The interactive paradigm prevalent in a theoretical understanding of digital media and video games is predicated on the fantasy of control over a cybernetic system. It is an extremely operational and thus hypermasculine perspective that conceals all those other forms of playful engagement with technology. To talk of interactivity as the main aesthetic denominator in video games is to fall back on the old paradigms of digital liberation and male control. (14)

Each of the five following chapters focuses on one aspect of distant play: interpassive, ambient, automated, intra-active, and spectated play. Further, each of these chapters examines one or more sample games on which the distance framework is applied. The chapter on interpassive play discusses idle and clicker games using the text-based game A Dark Room (2013) as the main example. Incremental games that became popular during the early 2010s, such as Cookie Clicker (2013) and Ian Bogost's satirical take on the emerging genre, Cow Clicker (2010), are also mentioned. Although this chapter's main focus is on video games played without the constant engagement of the player, i.e., even when the player is away from their device, the exploration of self-playing games here draws parallels with the later chapter on "Automated Play." In fact, Fizek asks the question: "Is it still a game if it is played by the machine?" (19) in this early chapter, even though the games used as examples of interpassivity at this point in the book are not fully automated. In addition, despite the different ways players mechanize gameplay tasks and actions – for example, setting auto-clickers or the use of third-party software in games like Pokémon Go – discussed in regard to delegated and automated play, factory-building, and automation games, e.g., Factorio (2020), Satisfactory (2019), which encourage players to embrace this type of gameplay, are not mentioned in either chapter. As a result, after reading both of these chapters, which are not in consecutive order, I felt that the author could have dwelt longer on the conceptualization and differences between automated and interpassive experiences. Fizek's

exploration of automation in gameplay, starting in this chapter and continuing later in the book, is nonetheless rich and engaging.

The third chapter, “Ambient Play,” effectively demonstrates the astonishingly broad range of media theories Fizek incorporates into her framework. The chapter begins with a brief reference to E. M. Forster’s science fiction short story “The Machine Stops” and proceeds with the explanation of the origins of the concept of ambiance in music, which leads to her understanding of ambient media and, in turn, ambient games. According to Fizek, “games are a native ambient medium,” and in this chapter, she shows how drawing attention to their “pervasive and all surrounding” character can allow us to gain a better understanding of video games (35-36). Her understanding of affective ambiance, which she describes as “a relaxing practice of slow play manifested by wandering aimlessly in the game world, contemplating its surroundings rather than engaging in structured or competitive gameplay,” is an interesting addition to the debate of “gendered” and “alternative” ways to experience games in the first chapter of the book (36-37, 13). Several aspects of ambient play, including its connection to the “economy of attention,” which the author considers one of the appeals of idle or interpassive play in the previous chapter, are also readdressed in this chapter, and discussed in more detail (22, 47).

While examples of the types of play not oriented toward an active human player are illustrated in several chapters, the author expresses a non-human-centric approach to games more strongly in the last two chapters. Drawing on Karen Barad’s concept of ‘agential realism,’ Fizek emphasizes the significance of posthumanism, which she considers “a vital perspective in the study of computerized play” that “allows us to reconceptualize agency and action as qualities distributed between humans, AI, and hardware” (103). While the book provides examples of how Barad’s philosophy has been previously applied to game studies by several other scholars, Fizek’s interpretation and utilization of agential realism and agential cut in the context of video games, mainly discussed in the chapter on “intra-active play,” are fascinating to read. This is where the author invests a significant amount of time explaining why “video games have [in fact] never been interactive” (69), as she claims, which makes this chapter one of the most striking parts of the book.

By bringing into play the concepts from various fields, ranging from quantum physics to media studies, posthumanism, and feminist theory, Fizek's book makes a compelling case for new ways of thinking about the experience of video games and the roles the human players as agents have in them. The interdisciplinary theories Fizek's framework relies on, including those from image theory and physics, which humanities scholars – such as myself – might find difficult to grasp at first, are presented in a clear and engaging way.. Each of the case studies, despite being brief, presents an interesting game with a distinct approach to gameplay. Since the book is only 103 pages long, it allows room for potentially extending the application of the distance framework to other modes of play.

Playing at a Distance is an essential read for media and cultural studies scholars interested in video game agency, involvement, and posthumanism in play, as well as students who are just starting to investigate the history of game studies and what makes video games different from other media.

Works Cited

Fizek, Sonia. Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic. MIT Press, 2022.

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