The missing Link:

Demonstrating videogame formalism through an analysis of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

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Keywords

Videogame formalism, approach, methodology, aesthetic experience, defamiliarization, Breath of the Wild

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we demonstrate the usefulness of videogame formalism as an approach to studying games as texts through an analysis of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (BotW) (Nintendo 2017). Following our upcoming book on videogame formalism (forthcoming with Amsterdam University Press), we show how a videogame formalism based on Russian formalist literary criticism (van Vught 2021) and Neoformalist film theory (van Vught 2016) enables a systematic analysis of how a game's devices cue an aesthetic experience of play. Given this tradition, the approach lends itself well to the study of art games or, more specifically, "poetic gameplay" (Mitchell 2016). However, we show how a broad consideration of the aesthetic experience triggered by defamiliarization of abstract game material, meaning, and experiences around ludic progression, makes the approach a valuable analysis method also suitable to AAA-games.

VIDEOGAME FORMALISM AS METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Formalism has faced much criticism in game studies (Juul 2015), mostly focused on how formalism contains or accommodates a conservative agenda by prescribing what counts as real games (Consalvo and Paul 2019), meaningful game components (Murray 2005), gamers (Fron et al. 2007), or game scholarship (Vossen 2018).

We therefore purposefully distinguish our videogame formalism from other uses of the term in game studies (Willumsen 2018) by 1) establishing it as a set of methodological considerations rather than an evaluative framework, 2) advancing the methodological strategy of the "dominant" (Thompson 1988) which sees all devices (rules-based, narrative, or stylistic) as equally important in triggering play experiences, 3) placing a game firmly in relationship to prevalent social, technical, and cultural norms in its time and their movement over time, and 4) acknowledging the role of the player-critic whose experience forms the basis for the analysis and whose different play strategies are capable of yielding different insights into the game.

Taking BotW as a case study, we systematically go through the methodological considerations that make up the approach: we 1) start by exploring our initial aesthetic response to the game, to then 2) establish the dominant and 3) the "poetic gameplay devices" and their different "motivations" evoking that response. This is an iterative process whereby a playthrough of the game ignites an interest (something that feels different or unfamiliar) which in turn helps us identify poetic gameplay devices in their struggle for dominance. This foregrounds additional devices, which subsequently has us adjust our initial aesthetic experience, leading us to focus on yet another set of devices, and so on. After identifying the devices and firmly establishing the dominant, we finally 4) ask what makes this game's functioning meaningful, leading to our reading of the game.

THE MISSING LINK

We recognize how BotW distinguishes itself from other games in the franchise by its lack of action-based design. This encourages active wandering (Kagen 2017) or flânerie (Flanagan 2009) in the game world and thereby appreciation of the environment as a "landscape of image" rather than a "landscape as environment" (Liboriussen 2008). Here, unlike many other games, wandering is not an act of resistance, but explicitly afforded by the game's design and therefore achieved through cooperative play (van Vught and Glas 2018).

This realization foregrounds various stylistic, narrative and rule-based devices functioning in different (transtextual, realistic, compositional, artistic, and ludic) ways to encourage wandering. For example, the divine beasts can be considered for their transtextual motivation, evoking references to *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico 2005). However, unlike slaying the collosi, slaying the divine beasts presents no narrative twist, foregrounding BotW's lack of a clear guiding narrative. As Schnaars (2021, 116) notes, the game's narrative framework is "negligible and optionally accessible," leaving the player to wander the game world without a clear "movement impetus" (Davies 2009). This can also be seen in the missing backstory of our player-character Link, who is introduced as having lost his memories. If the player does not actively pursue these memories (which involves accidently stumbling upon a memory triggering glow in the landscape), Link remains without backstory throughout the game. Also, several ludically motivated devices encourage active wandering including lack of a "spatial guidance system" that limits freedom of movement and lack of a quest bubble to get caught in, allowing exploration of the entire environment from the start (Schnaars 2021).

By exploring these and other devices, we show how the game encourages a specific type of play and thereby relationship to its environment. This effectively makes BotW an ecogame in which we are encouraged to contemplate and appreciate the overwhelming game landscape, having us experience the romantic idea of the divine. While the endpoint of our analysis shows some overlap with Farca, Lehrer & Navarro-Remesal (2020), we build the argument around a different dominant and

show the iterative methodological steps to get there. This shows the value of our videogame formalism for a AAA-game like BotW.

BIO
Jasper van Vught is assistant professor of new media and games in the department of Media and Culture Studies at the Utrecht University (Netherlands). His research focuses on game theory and methodology, game ethics and game history. He is part of the Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play, has worked within an international research project into the age classification of games and has been involved with the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision to preserve and canonize Dutch game history. His co-authored book *Videogame Formalism: On form, aesthetic experience, and methodology* is due to be published at the beginning of 2023 by Amsterdam University Press.

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