

The analyst's videogame: On psychoanalytic formalism

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Keywords

Lacan, enjoyment, formalism, videogame theory, *Fez*, *Tunic*, nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

Formalist approaches to videogames, like formalist approaches to films, television shows, and books, are largely decried as outdated, inconsequential, and indulgent. The standard critique of formalism is that it treats the subject's encounter with a text as if this encounter occurs in a vacuum. Formalism, in other words, fails to consider the various contexts in which texts are experienced. As a result of this criticism, the formalist approaches to videogames that predominated in the 1990s and early 2000s have given way to historicist and new materialist approaches, both of which view videogames as radically contextual or 'messy' phenomena (see Bogost, 2009). Even Jasper V. Vught (2021), one of few theorists to advocate for a formalist approach to videogames, claims that formalism can only be salvaged if we supplement it with historicism, such that any formalist analysis considers the various contexts in which videogames are experienced.

It is my contention, however, that the standard critique of formalism in game studies misunderstands the purpose and value of formalist modes of analysis. The attempt to salvage formalism by supplementing it with historicism represents a retreat from the radicality of formalism. To develop this point, I draw on a psychoanalytic—particularly Lacanian—conception of formalism. For psychoanalysis, texts such as videogames have the capacity to speak beyond their historical conditions of possibility (see McGowan, 2017; Žižek, 2008). When a subject submits themselves to the logic of a text, they may emerge from the encounter with a different orientation to both themselves and their historical and cultural contexts—an orientation that would not be possible had they not submitted themselves to the logic of the text.

What is formally valuable about videogames, I argue, is that they can confront us with what Jacques Lacan would call our *jouissance*, or enjoyment—a confrontation we unconsciously avoid in everyday life. Enjoyment, in Lacan's thought, is not a synonym for pleasure. Enjoyment is a surplus excitation, or excessive satisfaction, that goes beyond what Sigmund Freud (1961) calls "the pleasure principle". The subject experiences enjoyment when they repeat self-destructive patterns and behaviours without consciously meaning to (see Freud, 1961, pp. 8-11 for a famous case study of this phenomenon). Lacan's claim is that although we may find the repetition of such patterns and behaviours consciously unpleasurable, we derive an unconscious enjoyment from them because they enable us to restage the constitutive loss that brought us into being as speaking subjects (see Lacan, 1998, p. 178 for a schematic representation of this process).

As I have argued elsewhere, the enjoyment of videogame play consists not in the attainment of success or mastery but in the repetition of loss and failure (Nicoll, 2022,

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

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2023a, 2023b). While most videogames conceal the source of our enjoyment by encouraging us to identify with fantasies of pleasure and mastery, there are some that buck the trend by confronting us with our enjoyment. By revealing the source of our enjoyment to us in a formal encounter, videogames can articulate something about our subjectivity that history and culture cannot articulate for us.

To make this argument, I draw on an analysis of two videogames: *Fez* (Polytron Corporation, 2012) and *Tunic* (Isometricorp Games, 2022). Viewed through a historicist lens, *Fez* and *Tunic* appear to be nothing more than shallow nostalgia trips, designed to appeal to gamers fixated on the past. But a psychoanalytic formalist analysis reveals that *Fez* and *Tunic* utilize their nostalgic façades to lure players into a confrontation with the absence of any grounding for this nostalgia.

Like many videogames, *Fez* and *Tunic* are structured around the promise of attaining pleasure. They both locate this pleasure in the uncovering of a secret—in both cases, the secret of an arcane language. Psychoanalytic therapy is structured in a similar way. For therapy to work, the patient must begin by assuming that their analyst, who Lacan places in the position of the ‘Other’, is an entity who knows the secret to the patient’s various afflictions. Like a patient undergoing psychoanalytic therapy, the player of *Fez* and *Tunic* begins with a belief in an Other who withholds the secret to their lack. But the structure of both *Fez* and *Tunic*—like the structure of psychoanalytic therapy—is such that the player is guided to a point where they encounter the absence of any such secret, or what Lacan might call a ‘lack in the Other’ (see Zupančič (2000, p. 41 for a discussion of then notion of a lack in the Other). At the point of the encounter with the lack in the Other, the subject must confront their own enjoyment. *Fez* and *Tunic* use their play structures to reveal that the player’s enjoyment revolves around a fundamental absence, and that this absence exists not only in the player’s subjectivity, but in social authority (the Other) itself. This, I argue, is their formalist value: in revealing the locus of our enjoyment to us, they also reveal a ‘lack in the Other’, and in so doing they formally exceed their historical and cultural contexts.

BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Nicoll is a Chief Investigator in the Digital Media Research Centre and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication at Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

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