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Aubrey Anable, Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect

Wendi Sierra

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Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the review's first paragraph:

Aubrey Anable provides a succinct overview of her book early in the introduction: “I make a case for why media theory is not finished with representation and subjectivity” (p. xi). Of course, as you might imagine, making that case is anything but simple. As Anable discovers, much of game studies as a field fetishizes mechanics and computation as the distinguishing feature of gaming (and therefore the most important aspect for analysis). There are also profound and troubling reactions from various members of the gameplaying public when representation is discussed. This, she argues, has left game studies ill equipped to address how feeling and emotion impact and enhance game play, a deficiency she notes is not limited to game studies. In response, Anable presents affect, which she defines as “the aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things but are often registered only at the interface—at the moment of transmission or contact—when affect gets called up into representation” (p. xviii). This definition provides an excellent outline of the main points she explores in her work.

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

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helped make such elements of interactive fiction important to players of computer games, a fact Salter's book demonstrates beautifully for those familiar with the history of video games even as it introduces Jensen's quarter-century of contributions to those who are not.

In addition to showing why Jensen's work matters, Salter also spends significant time describing the game designer's diverse and creative investigations into other forms of narrative like story manuals, comics, interactive picture books, stories, and novels. The fluidity of Jensen's ability to move narratively across and between media forms (what is often referred to as "transmedia storytelling") speaks to Salter's sense of Jensen as a "writer-designer with a novelist's approach" (p. 138). I was struck by the critical importance this absorbing account affords the experiences of those who were part of the industry early on and how precious that is for a robust historical understanding of video games. Salter's invaluable *Jane Jensen* will surely become a foundational document that sheds light on the origins of games.

—Soraya Murray, *University of California at Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA*

**Playing with Feelings:
Video Games and Affect**

Aubrey Anable

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Introduction, acknowledgments, notes, and index. 152 pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781517900250

Audrey Anable provides a succinct over-

view of her book early in the introduction: "I make a case for why media theory is not finished with representation and subjectivity" (p. xi). Of course, as you might imagine, making that case is anything but simple. As Anable discovers, much of game studies as a field fetishizes mechanics and computation as the distinguishing feature of gaming (and therefore the most important aspect for analysis). There are also profound and troubling reactions from various members of the game-playing public when representation is discussed. This, she argues, has left game studies ill equipped to address how feeling and emotion impact and enhance game play, a deficiency she notes is not limited to game studies. In response, Anable presents affect, which she defines as "the aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things but are often registered only at the interface—at the moment of transmission or contact—when affect gets called up into representation" (p. xviii). This definition provides an excellent outline of the main points she explores in her work.

In particular, her definition highlights the notion of a constant feedback loop between users and interfaces. Throughout this work, Anable addresses the idea of being with technology, both bodily and spatially. Her third chapter, which focuses on casual games and posits the gradual breakdown of the work-play dichotomy, does so explicitly, but it is an implicit theme throughout the book. Anable repeatedly and in various ways asserts the importance of bodies and identities as crucial and unerasable components of the player-interface-game circuit. Her definition of affect also highlights the

importance of interface, something taken up in great detail throughout her second chapter. Touch, both from a literal and metaphorical perspective, has a great deal to do with affect. How do we, through keyboards, controllers, or direct contact with the screen, literally touch games? How do games, through their entanglement with our physical and emotional states, touch us back?

Some of the true joys of Anable's work are the minihistories sprinkled throughout. Her first chapter, "Feeling History," directly addresses the notion of how historical work has been done in game studies, and argues for "spelunking" as a method to "sense the embodied and structural limitations of what media histories and analysis reveal" (p. 3). This section, which explores the game *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013) and its connection to the history of the early adventure game *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), presents an alternative model to the archaeological process of history traditionally seen in work on gaming. However, glimpses of obscured histories permeate the work, from a description of the cybernetic fold and its impact on our interpretation of technology to a brief history of the display screen in computer technology. Anable's work is most certainly not a history, but she takes great care to ground her analysis solidly by contextualizing the technologies she addresses. In doing so, she provides an interesting glimpse into technologies and metaphors that are often taken for granted.

In addition to shedding light on the

oft-ignored concept of affect, Anable takes the opportunity to explore genres of games shunned by many canonical works. A mechanics-driven notion of analysis and interpretation inherently privileges some genres of games as more interesting and nuanced. As a response to this trend, Anable pointedly explores casual games, browser games, and art games.

If I have any quarrel with the book, it perhaps involves the slippery concept of affect itself. Anable draws on the classics—Silvan Tomkins, Brian Massumi, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—but the book itself is not a primer on affect, and I suspect those who are already skeptical of the framework are unlikely to be persuaded here. Further, I found myself wanting just a bit more out of the conclusion. Anable takes up the very interesting question of how we might use the concept of affect to inform archival practices, but the section is relatively brief and ends just as it catches my attention on the subject.

Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect makes a compelling case for increased academic focus on more representational aspects of gaming and provides an interesting analysis of how and why the field came to dismiss these elements. Further, each individual case study is richly detailed and engaging. Those with an interest in either affect theory or in representational elements of gaming will likely find much here to spark their curiosity.

—Wendi Sierra, *St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY*