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Affect, a Feminist Intervention into Game Studies

Historically and contemporaneously, the most vocal, powerful cultures surrounding the medium of video games have had, at best, a fraught relationship to gender. Game studies formalists assert the primacy of mechanics and the marginality of identity and politics in discourse surrounding the form of video games (e.g., see Kirkpatrick, 2011). Vocal male fans of the medium engage in organized campaigns of harassment against women critics and creators of video games (Wingfield, 2014). Curators of the medium's history favor narratives of technical and design progress that focus on the works of largely male technicians and entrepreneurs (Anable, 2018). In *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, Aubrey Anable (2018) applies affect theory to address, and redress, the androcentric bent of dominant discourses in game studies.

Rather than displace dominant formal discourses concerning mechanics/interaction (ludology) or narrative/content (narratology) in game studies, Anable addresses their omissions. In *Playing with Feelings*, Anable asserts that prevailing game studies discourses, in their focus on the technical and formal, have traditionally elided the significance of games' capacity to express, elicit, and represent code and mechanics *as experience*. In doing so, she argues, certain types of games, certain types of bodies that participate in games, and certain ways of discussing games, largely those coded as feminine, have been undervalued.

Consequently, Anable (2018) explicitly frames her text as a "feminist intervention" into the way video games have been studied and historicized (p. xvi). Particularly, she draws upon affect theory rooted in the work of philosopher and psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1962), with queer and feminist elaborations of Tomkins's work by Eve Kosofy Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995). Anable (2018) describes Tomkins's affect theory as a response to reductive strains of cybernetic theory that "collaps[ed] the computational metaphor" and asserted, non-metaphorically, that human minds and bodies could be understood like computer systems (p. 132). Tomkins, conversely, deployed cybernetic thinking to describe affect and cognition as two complex, co-assembling systems inextricably involved with one another. He also framed affect as an experience embodied, performed, and felt, without sharp distinction between a body's inward feeling and outward representing of affect. Anable also explicitly locates her theoretical position outside of, and at times *against*, Deleuzian and new materialist schools of affect theory, which she contends decenter the embodied subject and elide politics in ways that echo both game studies' formalist thinking and the reductive form of cybernetics contested by Tomkins.

Playing with Feelings is organized into four chapters, divided broadly into two halves. Anable uses the first half of the book to articulate her case for the use of affect theory in game studies. She lays out her reading of Tomkins, supplementing his work with subsequent scholarship on affect by Lauren Berlant (2008) and the queer phenomenology of Sara Ahmed (2006). She then explicates counter-histories of games that trouble conventional androcentric, entrepreneurial, and technical-innovation-focused histories of the medium. She also highlights counter-articulations of game artifacts that trouble the dominant critical discourses which prioritize "deep" coded systems over the aesthetic elements that reside on the "surface" (Anable, 2018. p. 46).

In the first chapter, "Feeling History," Anable details a history of video games that frames them as the affective face of the nascent, impersonal field

of computing. She highlights how the embodied experiences of writers and programmers such as Roberta Williams and Patricia Crowther inflected the very early years of the form in ways not commonly recognized. Anable also articulates how prevailing mechanistic histories of computing systems have impacted thinking on social and psychological systems, and posits Tomkins's work, which included a proposal for artificial intelligence that involved both an "affect system" and "cognitive system," as a counterpoint (Anable, 2018, p. 60). Interleaved among these threads is a discussion of the magical realist game *Kentucky Route Zero*, and the ways its fictional history of place, technology, and games render it a "feminist historiographical object" (p. 3).

In "Touching Games," the book's second chapter, Anable draws explicit parallels between game studies and affect theory discourse. Specifically, she highlights how both engage in a surface/depth dichotomy that focuses on underlying systems (of code, or of affective experience) and neglects the performance and representation (of code, or of affect experience) by bodies, games, and artifacts operating in society. She discusses the screen as a symbolic barrier between the attended-to underlying systems and the neglected subject experience of games, and examines how the phenomenon of touch-based games might help problematize that binary.

The second half of the book invests less time in articulating Anable's position on affect theory in relation to the history, experience, and creation of video games, and is more focused on applying an affective lens to critical discussion of video game artifacts. The third chapter, "Rhythms of Work and Play," specifically examines *casual* games, such as *Diner Dash* and *Candy Crush*. Casual games are typically not afforded deep critical appraisal, owing to their straightforward mechanics and their popularity among women, which render them invisible and not considered worthy for study and inclusion in androcentric games discourses focused on mechanical complexity. Anabel examines how *casual games* engage with 21st-century sentiments regarding the relationship between labor and leisure. Particularly, she examines how their presentations of affective and service labor (in games like *Diner Dash*, *Diaper Dash*, *Sally's Spa*, and *Wendy's Wellness*, among others) fit into larger histories of media addressing women's experiences with, and feelings regarding, labor.

Anable critiques neoliberal discourses around productive failure in her fourth chapter, "Games to Fail With." She touches upon failure as an essential quality in virtually all digital games, and the relation of failure to the affect experience of shame within capitalist discourses of productivity and personal responsibility. Anable then examines several experimental works of game art that deliberately involve irredeemable failure. She discusses the ways that works like Pippin Barr's *Snek* and Cory Arcangel's *Various Self-Playing Bowling Games* short-circuit the reflexive experiences of shame, and inspirational bromides about "failing forward," that typically attend failure under capitalism (p. 116). By haptically allowing players to "flail with failure," such games create a space for failures that are neither shameful nor productive, opening up new and non-prescriptive avenues for navigating feelings about failure (p. 120). And by intentionally embracing a glitch visual aesthetic marked by the artifacts of technical and commercial failure, these experimental ludic works disrupt prevailing market narratives that celebrate technical polish and visual realism.

Anable concludes with a brief reflection on future histories of games as a form, and how present archival projects for games, such as that in the Museum of Modern Art's architecture and design collection, may shape future histories of the medium. She notes that many such projects archive games as artifacts of interaction design, and prioritize the acquisition of source code. These curatorial priorities, per Anable, reflect gendered histories that prioritize technical and design innovation over subjective aesthetic and cultural experiences, and threaten to perpetuate those histories further. She closes with a call for an "affective archival practice for video games" to remedy, rather than continue, the elisions that have marked popular and institutional histories of games, as an art form (p. 134).

In *Playing with Feelings*, Anabel identifies clear, well-evidenced omissions of women's experiences and feminine-coded ways of knowing from game studies' discourse, and provides a compelling theoretical framework for addressing these omissions. She provides abundant evidence for the prevalence of formalist and technical discourse in games studies, and for that field's common dismissal of political, aesthetic, and cultural concerns typically regarded as feminine. The application of Tomkins's affect theory to the medium of video

games is novel and a valuable avenue of critical inquiry. The organization of the text is also effective, with the first two chapters laying Anabel's theoretical groundwork, and the second two chapters demonstrating feminist interventions by applying an affective analytical lens to game artifacts.

However, readers might desire more discussion of Tomkins's affect model itself, considering its centrality to Anabel's argument. Ultimately, readers learn the model's categories of affects, and that affect and cognition are "coassembled" systems, but Anabel never delineates exactly *what (an) affect is* for Tomkins, or herself (p. 25). Considering the many contested uses of the term *affect* discussed in the book, a working definition for the term would be helpful to readers, rather than inferring from the text.

Ultimately, *Playing with Feelings* articulates a standpoint for the analysis and discussion of video games that is valuable not only for academics in the field of games studies, but for anyone with an interest in critically playing, analyzing, making, or teaching video games. Anable's focus on the affective, expressive, and aesthetic capacities of the video game artform could make this a provocative and relevant text for art educators who engage with visual culture, digital media, or video games, specifically, in their practice. Teachers interested in drawing conceptual and rhetorical connections between video games and the more traditional artforms in their curricula, or who are interested in challenging their own or their students' gendered preconceptions of games, may find Anable's (2018) book a valuable resource and worthwhile to read.

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About the Author

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