

High Performance Theory: A Review of Darshana Jayemanne's Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames

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Darshana Jayemanne. *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 331 pp., ISBN NO.9783319853963.

What is the object of analysis for videogame studies? Some scholars have treated games as multimodal 'texts', rule-bound ludic systems or digital simulations; others have dissected the embodied experiences of individual players or mapped the practices of gamer subcultures and communities. There have been theories and taxonomies aplenty; ditto attempts to isolate elementary units of gameplay. With *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames*, Darshana Jayemanne (2017) proposed a method for analysing *ludic performances* and their emergence out of "the muddle of videogame play" (p. 270). Videogames, here, are primarily understood as heterogeneous ensembles of framing devices and feedback loops. Some of these framing devices are "hypermediate," such as score counters, health bars, menus (p. 121). Others are "integral": *Half Life 2* (Valve, 2004), for example, deploys a "visual dictionary" of graphical cues that enable players to, say, distinguish doors that can be opened from those that are mere set dressing (Jayemanne, 2007, p. 121). All help to establish the conditions for "felicitous" in-game performance (p. 124). Pleasingly, this answer to the question of what it is we're actually studying when we study games proves compatible with most of the others: from Jayemanne's perspective rules, code, stories, controller ergonomics, bodily capacities, generic conventions, and community etiquette can all be understood as shaping the "performative multiplicity" from which particular performances arise (p. 17). Playing a

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modded version of *DOOM* (id 1993) on a Pentium II in a family rumpus room is not the same thing as playing the Switch port on the bus—nor is it the same as streaming the game over Twitch; each scenario presents a different performative multiplicity, with distinct conditions for “felicitous” or “infelicitous” play.

The concept of performative felicity will be familiar to readers of J. L. Austin, the linguistic philosopher whose speech act theory provides the theoretical underpinnings for Jayemanne’s account of “ludic acts” (and, for that matter, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity). In the series of 1955 lectures later published as *How To Do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) would set out his concept of *performative utterances*: speech acts that don’t just describe states of affairs, but actually bring them into being – from orders, decrees, vows and promises to declarations of war. Whether or not such acts are efficacious depends on context, convention and precedent: Only a judge has the capacity to declare a defendant guilty, for example, and a promise will only succeed if we have faith in the person making it. Likewise, the felicity of particular ludic acts is contingent upon conditions set by a game and its players—witness the emergence of arcade-specific “house rules” about which moves and match-ups are considered legitimate.

Austin keeps company here with an array of literary critics, art historians, psychoanalysts, systems theorists and anthropologists, amongst whom Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin loom particularly large. While the book’s primary aim is to offer a framework for the comparative analysis of videogame performances, it proves every bit as concerned with art and literature as its title would suggest. At its core are in-depth analyses of a series of gallery scenes that begins with Willem van Haecht’s 1628 canvas *The Cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest* and moves, via readings of Balzac’s *Unknown Masterpiece* (1831) and Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1965) towards a pivotal scene in *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015). This sequence paints the gamer stumped by a devious block puzzle as part of a lineage that encompasses aristocratic connoisseurs of Baroque painting and paranoiac postmodern private dicks: All are concerned with felicitously navigating spaces saturated with framing devices; all want to determine which details signify and which can be tuned out.

This is not to say that their plights can be conflated, however. After all, these are very different historical situations, and Jayemanne is nothing if not meticulous when it comes to elaborating and theorizing the circumstances within which specific cultural forms and practices develop. Chapter 8, for example, lays the groundwork for its discussion of embodiment, affect and “collective innervation” on Twitch (p. 221) with a rigorous and rewarding discussion of the shock tactics deployed by nineteenth century caricaturists and pioneering cinematographers. You could hardly accuse the book of cutting corners - nor of succumbing to the suspicion of theory that pervades parts of contemporary academia. Of course, for some readers these might be faults rather than virtues; if you mostly care about games, then there’s a risk that some sections will seem opaque and alienatingly digressive.

Which is not to say Jayemanne ignores games or game studies. In fact, he returns to some of the field's foundational texts, revisiting the work of figures like Alex Galloway, Ian Bogost, Angela Ndalianis (whose *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004) informs the book's theorization of framing) and Espen Aarseth to instructive effect. The latter's concept of "aporia" (Aarseth, 1997, pp. 90–91)—the distinctly infelicitous experience of "uncertainty as to what constitutes a possible 'choice'" at a given point in a game—provides the basis for a discussion of "euphoria"—the sense of limitless possibility familiar to players of open world games like *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017) (Jayemanne, 2017, pp. 16, 146–148). Both states, for Jayemanne, involve an apprehension of the game as multiplicity. And while the book's ventures into cultural history might seem like detours, they are all in the service of developing a robust and refined framework for analysing digital games—a framework that the conclusion handily summarises in the form of a step-by-step guide to applying it.

While there are a lot of terms to get alongside, this is not jargon for jargon's sake; like all worthwhile theoretical models, Jayemanne's opens up interpretive possibilities rather than prescriptively shutting them down. Interested in professional and virtuoso play? You'll want to look at the book's account of how "gaming innervates a tactile unconscious which rapidly moves among framing devices as they emerge from the welter of detail, picking out and reacting to those that are critical to felicitous play" (p. 220). Looking for a language to describe how the storytelling techniques deployed in visual novels differ from those on display in action games? I would very much recommend the book's discussion of "illudic" and "perludic" acts (pp. 230–232). Especially thought-provoking is the late chapter on "chronotypology", which frames the dilation and contraction of ludic possibility spaces in terms of synchrony and diachrony. Thus speedrunning, Jayemanne proposes, might be seen as the process of "reducing alternate (i.e. diachronic) procedures" in order to decant a single synchronic sequence of inputs from a game's multiplicity—while grinding, deliciously, can be seen as the act of "fossicking for a deeply buried seam of diachrony in dense synchronic performative strata" (pp. 275, 273).

Having painstakingly assembled this intricate theoretical apparatus, it feels like a shame Jayemanne doesn't get more space to let 'er rip. There are readings of games sprinkled throughout the book, and they're invariably sparkling and suggestive. This is true of its accounts of games like *Planescape Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999) or *Life is Strange*, but it's equally true of its reading of Shinji Mikami's flagrantly goofy, exquisitely tuned brawler *God Hand* (Clover, 2006), the kind of game that has traditionally proven less amenable to critical exegesis. In many cases, however, these interpretations feel more like demo-style vertical slices—glimpses of how you *might* elaborate a fuller account of speedrunning or streaming or save scumming or *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *Ikaruga* (Treasure, 2001) using these tools.

But maybe that's for readers to do. It's not often a book makes you want to revisit Treasure's

(1994) *Alien Soldier* and Alain Robbe-Grillet's (1960) *In the Labyrinth*, but that's the case here. Unabashedly erudite in its engagement with history and theory, it's also concerned with making sure its concepts can be put to use. Let's hope they are.

References

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