



PLAYING WITH FEELINGS: VIDEO GAMES and AFFECT¹

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Author Aubrey Anable is an assistant professor in the film studies department at Carleton University in Canada. She received a Ph.D. in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester and her academic interests include digital culture with the emphasis on digital media aesthetics, theory of affect, film and media theory, urban studies, cultural studies with notions of feminist theory and queer culture, cybernetics, critical theory, gender and media technologies and experimental media.²

Throughout the text Anable is looking into the intersection of video games and affect theory. Even though the title may suggest a dive into the discipline of psychology, this book is far from a psychology textbook and closer to a complex critical text with notions of philosophy and cultural studies. It presents video games as affective systems and understands video games in a broader sense as a merge of aesthetics, narrative, code, image, sound, hardware, our internal concepts, other players, sociohistorical context and cultural meanings. Affect is understood as a term „culturally situated in relation to the gendering of the bodies and objects of mass-media culture“(p.100) representing „aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things but are often registered only at the interface” (p. xviii). In general, we have to take into consideration the impact of affect on our perception and preferences and its importance in creating what we do and don't like. In the context of affect theory the ideas of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, author of the affect theory itself, culturologist Raymond Williams or professor of Women's studies Elizabeth Wilson and many others are presented. Anable doesn't understand games as a new medium, but rather as historically, technologically and culturally grounded concept. Nonetheless, she considers proponents of gamification to be overly ambitious regarding cultural influence of games. The book is substantiated by a multitude of examples whilst author shifts focus from big-budget games towards indie games, casual games and art games. Since author considers herself a feminist, reader can encounter some discursive turns towards feminist notions and remarks. As she said: “I seek to expand our understanding of the ways video games and game studies can participate in feminist and queer interventions in digital media culture”(p.xvii). Surely it is an interesting topic to explore, but it might seem slightly forced into the text sometimes.

In the first chapter, Anable aspires to change the presumption about women being historically invisible in the computer world. The feminist video game history is being illustrated on the video game *Kentucky Route Zero*.³ Author is trying to debunk the im-

1 The review is a partial output of the research project FPPV-27-2018 *Frustration as a motivating factor*.

2 Aubrey Anable. [online]. [2018-08-15]. Available at: <<https://carleton.ca/filmstudies/people/aubrey-anable/>> ; Compare to:

3 CARDBOARD COMPUTER: *Kentucky Route Zero*. [digital game]. Chicago : Cardboard Computer, 2013.; *Kentucky Route Zero. A game in five acts by Cardboard Computer*. [online]. [2018-08-15]. Available at: <<http://kentuckyroutezero.com/>>.

pression that video game history is all about men. Furthermore within *Kentucky Route Zero*, she wanders into the topic of disorientation, humor and the term cybernetic fold (introduced by Eve Kostofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank describing a historical period when “...scientists’ understanding of the brain and other life processes is marked by the concept, the possibility, the imminence, of powerful computers, but the actual computational muscle of the new computers isn’t available”).⁴

In the second chapter with a double meaning title *Touching games* author examines how physical touch (e.g. swiping) can „touch” our feelings within a game and how body, screen and code are forming an affective circuit. The example of the game *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery EP*⁵ illustrates the suppression of visual perception (a game with poor graphics) and pronounces a relevance of listening and touching that augment gaming experience. Hereby, the screen acts as a sensual surface functioning within a larger affective system, but the ability to feel and represent emotions is still tied to the interface. She notes that gestural manipulation on screen is considered as more intuitive than other types of digital interfaces. She further discusses one of game's cardinal qualities – game feel. She proposes that the term game affect is more precise. Later, she elaborates on the game called *The Empathy Machine*⁶ that ask the player to put a hand on the screen even though it doesn't use a touchscreen technology. It can be seen as the critique of „fetishization of immersion in digital media” (p.48). The queer discourse is introduced within the example of *Dys4ia*⁷ that translates feelings arising from gender transition into a game.

In chapter 3: *Rhythms of Work and Play* author analyses popular games (*Candy Crush Saga*,⁸ *Plants vs. Zombies 2: It's about time*,⁹ *Diner Dash*¹⁰) that make us ‘work’ in moments when we paradoxically yearn to escape from obligations, the boundaries between work and play are diminishing. Casual games (more precisely click management or time management games) are perceived as affective systems, a part of work culture and work rhythms providing what we are possibly lacking in our jobs: clear instructions, reward, identifiable outcomes, involvement and perhaps a little bit of fun. They serve as bridging activities and, most importantly, emotional mediators. As emotional mediators, according to Anable, they provide structures of feeling different from other types of games and media forms. While on the subject, she considers the genre of casual games to be neglected in terms of their significance(e.g. cultural)and she claims the reason for this neglect is the strong association of this genre with women. Chapter ends with the concept of ‘zaniness’ as one of the postmodern aesthetic categories (the zany, the cute, the interesting) elaborated in the work of Sianne Ngai. The category of zany applied to human production and working environment is humorous, playful, but at the same time dangerous, creating a feeling of losing control and frantic activity.¹¹

4 KOSOFKY SEDGWICK, E., FRANK, A.: *Shame and its sisters*. Durham : Duke U.P, 1995, p. 12.

5 CAPYBARA GAMES, SUPERBROTHERS: *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery EP*. [digital game]. Toronto : Capybara Games, 2011.

6 POZO, T. D.: The Trouble With 'Empathy Games': Queer Game Design as Haptic Media. In *Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2017. Conference Proceedings from International Scientific Conference 22nd – 26th March 2017*. Chicago, IL, 2017, p. 1-9. [online]. [2018-11-23]. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/34622663/Pozo_Queer_Games_as_Haptic_Media_SCMS_2017>.

7 ANTROPHY, A.: *Dys4ia*. [digital game]. USA : Newgrounds, 2012.

8 KING: *Candy Crush Saga*. [digital game]. St Julian's : King, 2012.

9 POP CAP GAMES: *Plants vs. Zombies 2: It's about time*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2013.

10 GAME LAB: *Diner Dash*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : PlayFirst, 2004.

11 NGAI, S.: *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 333.

The last chapter talks about video games that don't distract us from frustration of everyday life but rather actively create frustration. It embraces the aesthetics of failure characterized by low graphics, awkward controls or no control over the game whatsoever, games that seem primitive but are hard or even impossible to win, or games with unusual timeframes (ranging from one second up to years) Playing such games, our assumptions of how games should work are distorted. Because of that we are able to find new affective experience in places we expected to process automatically. Moreover, according to Anable, when confronted with aesthetics of failure we can better understand how to deal with real-life failures.

The book *Playing with feelings* is a reaction to the belief that these days the significance of narrative and images in games is suppressed and the emphasis is placed on code or action. Aubrey Anable insists that we cannot separate representation from computation. The style of the book is quite essayistic, but sufficiently supported by scholarly sources and rich in examples, although not so much in recommendations or practical implications. It offers a challenging multi-discursive reading and prompts reader to look past the most common interpretations of digital games and related contexts.

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