

Xeno-ludens: deformativism and playful estrangement

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INTRODUCTION

In this extended abstract, we intend to delve into the relationship between the video game and deformative criticism, an experimental model of criticism that applies procedures and rules to cultural objects in order to generate emergent experiences in the analysis. Our intention is to reflect on the two perspectives of this relationship between deformative criticism and video games: on the one hand, the applicability of notions such as "deformation" or "deformance" to the field of video games; on the other hand, the understanding of how much deformative criticism and its proposal of a "parametric turn" in the digital humanities may be seen as videoludic.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The focus of this extended abstract is the relationship between the video game and the current of "deformative criticism", a multimodal approach to criticism that experiments with the application of Oulipian parameters (O'Leary 2021) on different cultural artifacts (literary texts, video games, films) with the idea of estranging their forms and forcing the emergence of unforeseen meanings in the analysis. Deformative criticism seeks to produce an estrangement by deforming the artistic work through the application of rules or algorithmic parameters, procedures that the founders of this trend call "deformances" (Samuels; McGann 1999): subtracting certain types of words, inverting the order of the lines of a poem, changing some terms for others, etc., are some examples of deformances. The main purpose of these practices is to highlight potential aspects and forms of the text (stylistic patterns, tempo subtleties, terminological frequencies) that would otherwise go unnoticed in a conventional interpretation. Deformative criticism thus emerged from Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann as a heterodox proposal within literary criticism to analyze texts through their parametric and performative manipulation.

However, in recent years, a deformative approach (or deformativism) has conquered new areas, partly due to the rapid democratization of digital editing tools and partly due to the increasingly undeniable presence of algorithms in visual culture. Lev Manovich's Software Studies Initiative lab was a forerunner in investigating the possibilities of the ImageJ analysis software to create "media visualizations" of photographs, films and video games (Manovich 2002, 2011). In a new form of

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"imaginary reverse engineering" (Manovich 2013) the lab generated "spatial montages": murals of frames that allowed a "distant reading" (Moretti 2005) of the film's metric patterns. The procedure could be applied to all kinds of audiovisual materials, from a series of sequences from Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928) (see Figure 1) to hundreds of hours of gameplay from the video game *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix 2002) (see Figure 2). In addition to allowing statistical considerations, media visualization generated images that aesthetically related to the works of artists such as Brendan Dawes, Benjamin Samuel or Peter Kubelka. Years later, scholar Kevin Ferguson (2017) followed Manovich's model and employed ImageJ to merge frames from different films into a single average image. This generated a set of images that were intended to serve an analytical function (revealing color rhythms and compositional recurrences) but at the same time evoked the vaporous aesthetic of Turner's paintings (see Figure 3). That same year the artist Claire Hentschker tested the same technique on a series of games from the video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013). The same algorithms composed a deformation that served both artistic and academic purposes.

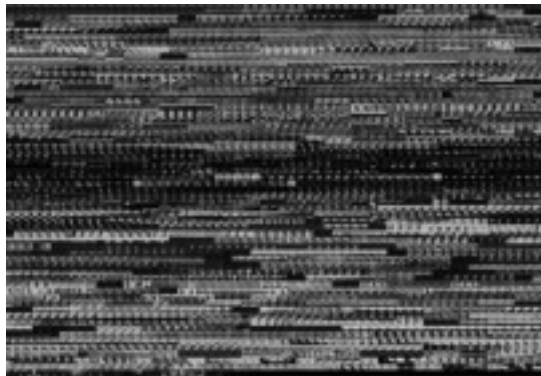


Figure 1: Media visualization of *The Eleventh Year* (Dziga Vertov, 1928)

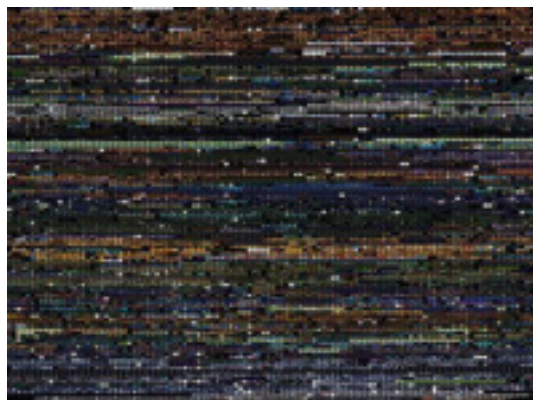


Figure 2: Media visualization of *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix, 2002)

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Figure 3: Summed image or average image of *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975)

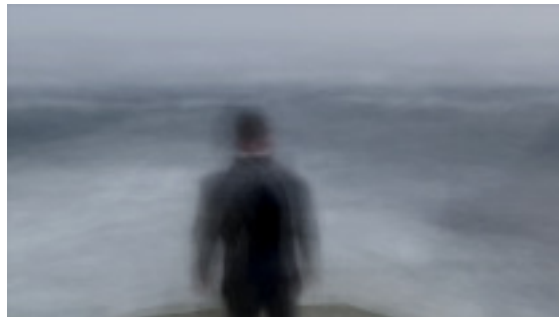


Figure 4: Summed image or average image of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013)

All these techniques are examples of a digital deformativism that explores a hybrid terrain between academic analysis and aesthetic expression, between the quantitative and the poetic (Mittel 2019, 2021). From the rise of videographic essay (Grant et al. 2019) researchers such as Jason Mittel, Alan O'Leary or Catherine Grant (among others) began to apply algorithmic deformation in the field of Film Studies, imposing predefined rules to re-edit films in search of hidden patterns. Other authors such as Stephen Ramsay (2011), Kevin Ferguson (2017) or Shane Denson (2019) advocate a pataphysical and anti-positivist use of specialized software. In Game Studies, authors such as Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) have created Oulipian variations of *Super Mario Bros* (Miyamoto 1985) or topological deformations of *The Legend of Zelda* (Miyamoto, Tezuka 1986), deformational remakes that attempt to understand the deep structures of the original games (Boluk, LeMieux 2020). Deformative criticism has been defined as a form of critical modding (Seiça 2018), a type of parametric academicism (O'Leary 2021) or a device of algorithmic critique that generates reading machines (Ramsay 2011).

Deformativism betrays the normative uses of software and statistics while advocating for a speculative approach to algorithms and quantification tools. It privileges the creation of strange artifacts that retain ambiguity regarding their utility. Frequently, deformativist critics are unaware of the distorted outcome that algorithms will

produce, thereby transforming this type of experimentation into a form of “algorithmic spectacle” (Fizek, 2022).

The connections between this theoretical trend and the video game have not yet been explored.

The present abstract aims to be a first step in this direction, interrogating the convergence between the video game, an algorithmic medium with critical powers, and deformativism, an approach that, as we have seen, seeks a form of critique with ludic features. To this end, we will articulate the reflection around a series of questions:

Is it possible to think equivalences between the reading machines of deformative criticism and the textual machines conceptualized by Espen Aarseth (1997) in his theory of cybertext? What relation does deformativism maintain with current trends in videoludic culture such as the randomization of games (randomizers) or modding? To what extent is the videogame, in its practice and in its form, a deformative medium by nature?

To answer these questions, we propose the reconsideration of deformativism as an alternative modality of critical playfulness (Sicart 2014) and post-procedural criticism (Bohunicky 2018), understanding that the deformativist embodies the model of a quixotic player (Sicart 2018) or an indocile player (Vargas, Navarrete 2019) who self-imposes conditions and rules (*ludens*) to watch movies, read texts or play video games in strange ways (*xeno*).

Several studies have evaluated Shklovsky's (2012) concept of defamiliarization for its potential application in Game Studies: Pöttsch has offered an exhaustive survey of the history and application of the term to propose a neoformalist approach to estrangement (Pöttsch 2017). In this sense, Pöttsch coined the concept of procedural *ostranenie* to describe a form of estrangement induced by game mechanics (Pöttsch 2019). While the applied use of *ostranenie* is often limited to the analysis of specific titles (Gerrish 2018; Mitchell 2014, 2016, 2018), other texts have attempted a more systematic approach to the various defamiliarization techniques involved in the creation of poetic gameplay (Chew, Mitchell 2019; Mitchell et al. 2020). On the other hand, Brian Schrank has pointed out the need to recognize the importance of the formalist tradition in the study of the videoludic avantgarde and has analyzed the estrangement, both narrative and political, employed by different works to denounce and subvert the conventions of the medium (Schrank 2014). Our approach departs from critical deformativism and Gilles Deleuze's (2003) concept of diagram to ground a type of ludic estrangement that, unlike previous proposals, is transmedial in nature. Its object can be a film, a text, a video game or any software that serves as "playable media" (Sicart 2023).

What happens when the same parametric deformance is applied to a book, a film and a video game? For example, do the effects remain the same when the algorithmic deformance eliminates words in a poem, characters in a film, and avatars in a video game? Are there consistent formal elements revealed across different media?

From this perspective, we propose to situate deformativism within an ecology of practices, in and around play, that point to a *xeno-play* paradigm: instead of creating

rhetoric structures from the processes of play (Bogost 2006, 2007), deformation operates an algorithmically oriented estrangement, thus constituting strange forms of playing (xeno-play) and strange forms of game (xeno-game).

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