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Sonia Fizek starts her fascinating media-theoretical analysis of the "borderlands of video game aesthetic" with two quotations: Donna Haraway stressing the mediated nature of any accounts of embodiment and technology and Albert Einstein questioning the possibility of communication at a distance.[1] These quotations introduce the concept of "mediated distance," which Fizek sees as central to understanding our experience of games and play in the context of computation. Later, when discussing idle games, Fizek inserts a disclaimer: "This chapter will not read itself; neither will it flip its pages automatically. In contrast to the subject and object of its reflection, it needs the reader's undivided attention and a trivial amount of hands-on participation to progress" (p. 17). But you are not reading *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. Instead, you have delegated the effort (and pleasure) of reading the text to me; you are *reading at a distance*. I encourage you to keep this mediated distance in mind as you read me reading Fizek.

In chapter 1, Fizek problematizes the notion of "interactivity" that underlies much scholarship about games and interactive media. Starting from Janet Murray's focus on responsiveness as a primary representational property of the computer (*Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* [1998]) and Chris Crawford's characterization of interactivity as conversation (*The Art of Interactive Design: A Euphonious and Illuminating Guide to Building Successful Software* [2002]), Fizek raises potential counter-examples for the centrality of interactivity to games, including John Conway's *Game of Life* (1970) and walking simulators, such as *Dear Esther* (2012). Intriguing possibilities arise when the focus on interactivity is questioned. Can interactivity be seen as totalitarian, as posited by Lev Manovich?[2] And if a game requires interactivity (and, by extension, requires players), what do we make of such games as *Firewatch* (2016) that remove much of the interactivity or such practices as speedrunning that involve deliberately "playing the wrong way"? This broad-ranging discussion,
spanning media theory and game studies, is one of the strengths of the book, allowing Fizek to bring new perspectives to both fields.

Chapter 2 starts us on the trajectory that will occupy the rest of the book: how to think about games that “we (mostly) don’t play,” using Robert Pfaller’s concept of “interpassivity” as a focus (Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment [2017]) (p. 17). This is framed using a compelling description of Fizek’s own experience of A Dark Room (2013), an idle game where the player initially takes actions that are eventually deliberately automated. This process of delegating not just tasks but also pleasure to the machine, Fizek argues, represents an emerging aesthetic of delegated enjoyment.

In chapter 3, Fizek shifts the focus to ambient play. She sees certain video games, such as Mountain (2014), as taking on an operational ambience, allowing the player to focus their attention elsewhere while the game continues to play, thereby “remov[ing] the active role of the player” (p. 39). Similar to ambient media, this allows for calm, almost meditative play. Drawing on such examples as wandering in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017), Fizek argues that even games that are not explicitly ambient can have slow, calm moments. While Fizek characterizes these games as calm, she notes that they come out of a moment where we are increasingly distracted, caught up in what N. Katherine Hayles calls “hyper attention.”[3]

One step beyond ambient play is completely automated play. Fizek begins chapter 4 by describing Emissaries (2015), “a videogame that plays itself” (p. 51). Fizek draws connections between automated play and player pianos, which play music without a piano player; artificial intelligence (AI), such as AlphaGo, which plays chess against a human opponent; and auto battlers, such as Auto Chess (2019). This automation suggests a paradox: as games are automated, the question of whether they are really games arises, but at the same time, what often distinguishes video (or computer) games from boardgames or tabletop role-playing games is the very presence of automation. So, what makes video games distinct is also, at times, what leads some players to question the status of certain video games as “real” games.

To address this paradox, in chapter 5, Fizek brings in Karen Barad’s notion of “agential realism” as a way to overcome the Cartesian cut between subject and object, player and play, and instead take a more relational approach that “look[s] at how subjects and objects emerge through concrete inter-actions” (p. 72).[4] This perspective characterizes games not as mechanisms but as “phenomena in the making,” allowing us “to see play ... as an entanglement of human and non-human forces, turning away from the notion that the human must necessarily call the shots” (pp. 80, 82). This is a promising theoretical framework for tackling what it means to play at a distance.

Finally, in chapter 6, Fizek turns to spectated play. Looking to livestreaming, she asks whether there is a need for a certain visual (or even computational) literacy to watch this type of spectacle. Fizek argues that every medium requires a certain tension: between signal and silence in radio, between observed and performed in film, and between representation and computation in video games. Drawing on such examples as Various Self-Playing Bowling Games (2011), Fizek asks “how do we perform an aesthetic analysis of the spectated play beyond that which is accessible to our senses?” (p. 95). Touching on critical code studies and media archaeology, she eventually returns to the question of how to make sense of the spectacle of livestreamed video games that are watched rather than played.

Fizek ends by observing that “today’s computing is happening at an ever-greater distance from human action,” a relevant observation given the current rapid development of large language models and generative AI (p. 101). Each chapter in this interesting and timely work introduces suggestive
concepts and brings in relevant examples but then unfortunately moves on. As a reader, I felt led along the borderlands, glimpsing something promising just over the horizon but never quite moving close enough to see it clearly. Fizek has put together an intriguing exploration of playing at a distance. I look forward to seeing deeper exploration in future work of the connections between the threads that are laid out here.

Notes


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