

What is Videogame Formalism? Exploring the Pillars of Russian Formalism for the Study of Videogames

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Abstract

This article provides a general overview of the theoretical foundations of formalism to assess their usefulness for the study of videogames and thereby establish grounds for a more robust approach. After determining that formalism has been used as a go-to term for a variety of ontological and methodological approaches in game studies, this article draws more specifically from Russian Formalism to use the label for a functionalist approach interested in how formal devices in videogames work to cue aesthetic responses. Through an exploration of three pillars of Russian Formalism, a videogame formalism emerges that focuses on the workings of the game as a machine while still taking the aesthetic player response as the methodological starting point and acknowledging the importance of synchronic and diachronic historical perspectives in establishing the functioning of game devices.

Keywords

Russian Formalism, videogame formalism, methodology, functionalism, videogame aesthetics

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Introduction

In game studies, formalism has often been used as an all-embracing term covering a range of methodological and ontological approaches. Willumsen (2018), for instance, shows how formalism is used for three different approaches in game studies: an aesthetic game formalism identified with those scholars looking for a ‘narrativeness’ in games (cf. Murray, 1997); a game essentialism identified with those scholars interested in finding the ‘gameness’ in games (cf. Juul, 2003) and finally a formalism as a level of abstraction identified with design scholars or content analysts interested in mapping the constituting elements in games (cf. Lankoski & Björk, 2015). On top of that, in (online) discussions on the pros and cons of formalism, the term has been used for an approach focused on interactive form to the detriment of audio-visual ‘content’ (Lantz 2015a, 2015b) as well as for an approach equating form with a broader set of (material) components (Bogost, 2015; Keogh, 2015). All these different uses of the term dilute the usefulness of the approach and invite (often unfounded) criticism (cf. Juul, 2015).

At the base of this disparate use of the term seems to lie a lack of engagement with the (much more focused) historical tradition of formalism in other fields like film studies or literary studies. Lankoski and Björk (2015), for instance, use the term without reference to these traditions thereby inadvertently lumping formalism together with structuralism, pattern language in architecture and game design theory. And while works by film scholars such as King and Krzywinska (2002, 2006a, 2006b) and Wolf (2001) are situated within a neoformalist paradigm (which itself builds on the literary tradition), neoformalism remains an unmentioned and unexplored backdrop for ideas which means the focus moves seemingly randomly between formal elements like rules or narrative devices, experiences like presence, and even the industry’s production model, without a legitimizing and guiding approach. Although I am not claiming that these approaches are not in their own sense formalisms (I am not making an exclusive claim to the term here), I am arguing, in line with Thompson (1988, p. 3), that not engaging with these traditions also keeps these approaches from building on a set of core assumptions (on what constitutes form, engagement with the artefact and the relationship of the artefact to the world around it) which risks them becoming unfocused, inconsistent and even self-contradictory.

Still, there are certainly works that do more explicitly engage with this formalist tradition and connect it to the study of games. Myers (2010), for example, gives an extensive overview of the Russian Formalist tradition with the aim of positioning it within semiotics and as ‘the initial step in establishing a relationship between aesthetics and cognition’ (2010, p. 48). Willumsen (2018) delves into the literary tradition of Russian Formalism and gives a great explanation of the difference between material and form referencing Aristotle’s different causes in order to point out different formalisms in game studies. And Pöttsch (2017) and Mitchell (2016) and his co-authors (2017; 2019; 2020) explore the Russian Formalist idea of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) for the study of (an aesthetic experience) of games. However, in

these cases, the discussion of these traditions is either put in service of other aims than establishing a more focused and more fine-grained videogame formalism (a videogame semiotics for Myers (2010) and a taxonomy of formalisms in game studies for Willumsen (2018)), or remains limited to a specific component of the approach (ostranenie for both Pötzsch (2017) and Mitchell (2016)). This risks moulding formalism in such a way that the resulting approaches no longer reflect the core assumptions of the formalism they are based on (such as the fact that Russian Formalism and semiotics are at odds with one another) or leaves us guessing how other components of the tradition could be applied in a formalist toolkit for the study of games.

Formalism thus requires a fairer and more encompassing look into its heritage to see how its different principles can be appropriated in the study of videogames. This helps to rescue the term from inappropriate/misinformed use (e.g. reductive and prescriptive claims on what counts as proper form and thereby as ‘real games’ (cf. Consalvo & Paul, 2019) or legitimate game scholarship (cf. Vossen, 2018)) as well as often unfounded criticism (e.g. for erecting stifling definitions or a focus on rules to the detriment of story, or meaning (cf. Juul, 2015)). It also shows how certain discussions (on form versus content or on the role of the critic) have a history beyond game studies that we can learn from. And finally, it helps to establish a more fine-grained approach for the textual analysis of videogames which shows overlap with other approaches discussing videogame form but also distinguishes itself in various ways. In this article, formalism is understood in line with the core principles of Russian Formalism in literary theory. The core pillars of this approach are explored for their ideas about 1) the object as machine, 2) the aesthetic experience and 3) the importance of historical context. When exploring these pillars, I will continuously draw the focus back to the study of games and show how the core assumptions overlap or differ from certain other approaches focused on videogame form and provide focus points and theoretical foundations for a focused and robust videogame formalism. However, before this exploration of Russian Formalism, I aim to quickly acknowledge the heterogeneity of the approach and explain the choices I have made in presenting this particular historical account.

What is Russian Formalism?

Although a variety of different research perspectives have been labelled as formalism over the years,¹ I choose to focus specifically on the tradition of Russian Formalism for two main reasons. First of all, as Myers (2010) rightfully notes, Russian Formalism is ‘one of the clearest and most influential statements of formalism in the arts’ (p. 40) and has consequently been the one most explicitly taken up in our field (e.g. Chew & Mitchell, 2019; Mitchell, 2016; Mitchell, Kway, Neo, & Sim, 2020; Mitchell, Sim, & Kway, 2017; Myers, 2010; Pötzsch, 2017; Willumsen, 2018). Secondly, the approach provides a highly flexible toolkit capable of guiding research into form aspects without predetermining their relevance or their functioning. As

Eichenbaum (2012) puts it: ‘We posit specific principles and adhere to them insofar as the material justifies them. If the material demands their refinement or change, we change or refine them’ (p. 81).

However, (partly) due to this flexibility, Russian Formalism is also known as a highly heterogeneous approach. Its theorists were subdivided into two different geographically dispersed schools of thought which approach their objects of study from slightly different perspectives. In St. Petersburg, scholars such as Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum and Tynianov formed the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOJAZ) and approached their objects as literary historians. As such, their interests lay mostly in those devices that distinguished art from non-art or literature from non-literature. On the other hand, Jakobson and Thomashevsky, as members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, approached their objects as linguists. As such, they were interested in how the word in literature functions aesthetically. This means that rather than theorizing about what constituted literature (at a given time), the Muscovites theorized about the functioning of language and approached literature as a testing ground for these theories (Erlich, 1980, p. 94).

This heterogeneity also showed within the schools themselves, where consensus on methodological or epistemological issues was rarely reached. In fact, Steiner (2014) spends his entire book outlining the nuanced differences between Formalist theories in an aim to find commonalities in different Formalist models only to admit that the only real agreement in Formalism seems to be the ‘implicit agreement to disagree’ (p. 221). Or, as he puts it elsewhere, quoting Medvedev: ‘there are as many Formalisms as there are Formalists’ (in Steiner, 2014, p. 18). Similarly, Erlich (1980) shows how Formalism evolved significantly over the years, changing from a polemic approach emphasizing the self-valuable word and a strict separation between art and life into a more nuanced poetic semantics interested in both sound and meaning and recognizing the connection between literature and other overarching systems.

So, given the notorious heterogeneity of Russian Formalism, any historical account will have to direct attention to a limited and manageable set of focus points. In this article, I have attempted to justify the focus by drawing extensively on the Russian Formalism compendia by Steiner (2014) and Erlich (1980) as well as on neoformalist film theory. Steiner and Erlich’s books are milestones in the study of Russian Formalism that outline both the establishment and historical development of the movement within the Russian socio-political and cultural landscape of the time, as well as its main analytical tenets and contributions to the field of literature studies. Neoformalism, first developed by Thompson (1981, 1988) and later Bordwell (1989a, 1989b), translates Russian Formalism’s core ideas around defamiliarization, motivations and techniques (such as *mise-en-scène*, narrative, editing techniques or sound), and the dominant to the study of film. With Bordwell, Thompson, & (later) Smith’s (2019) introductory textbook into film analysis currently in its 12th edition, neoformalism has become one of the most widely adopted approaches in film studies.

While a strong reliance on these overview works may come across as restrictive in a paper exploring the foundations of Russian Formalism, it will in fact allow for an

overview of core pillars of the approach and prevent this article from getting bogged down in the details and different translations of often contradicting and evolving perspectives. The works by Erlich (1980) and Steiner (2014) have already done the more detailed heavy lifting for us and especially Thompson's early work on neoformalism (1981) has done a great job at showing the usefulness of certain core assumptions of the approach beyond a study of literature or language.² The works by Steiner, Erlich and the neoformalist film scholars are therefore specifically useful for the purpose of this article: bringing focus and clarification to the heterogeneous school of Russian Formalism and showing how a literary theory can be transposed for the study of another medium.

The Object: The Work as Machine

If the Russian Formalist movement is known for one thing, it is probably the fact that it eschews a romantic concentration on the artist and instead aims to shift the focus to the work itself. As such, the Russian Formalists have a specific understanding of the work which characterizes it as relatively distinct from an author. Influenced by Italian futurism, Shklovsky compares literature to a *machine*, a combination of different interrelating materials that are crafted in such a way to cue certain poetic reader responses (Shklovsky, 2012, p. 46). This machine metaphor has three important functions in focusing the Formalist argument. First of all, it allows Shklovsky to focus on the 'internal laws of literature' and look 'under the hood' of the literature machine, rather than focus on the external conditions of the writing process or an idiosyncratic reader response (Steiner, 2014, p. 41–42). Secondly, the machine metaphor also deromanticizes the role of the author, focusing on literature as the result of skilled craftsmanship, instead of the organic and almost sacred growth of creative ideas springing from the mind of an author genius. And finally, the machine metaphor refocuses the study of literature from finding out what a work means to finding out how a work works.

The term 'machine' of course resonates with game scholars. Aarseth (1997), for instance, famously saw a cybertext, as a 'machine': 'a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs' (p. 21). And Juul (2004, 2005), borrowing from computer science, terms the game a 'state machine', a machine which changes states in response to user input. With this terminology, these scholars shift the focus away from the text (or output) towards the text producing machinery underneath and claim that it is this underlying machinery that distinguishes a cybertext from a text or a game from a non-game which would also justify an independent field of research (cf. Copier, 2003). In other words, these scholars appear to be looking 'under the hood' for the 'heart of gameness' (Juul, 2003), the empirically assessable components that make a given work a cybertext or a game.

At first glance, a videogame formalism based on Russian Formalism would thus overlap with these early approaches that seem to equate game form with an underlying rule-based system. Also the Russian Formalists focused on an essence of literature,

which they called ‘literaturnost’, and also the Russian Formalists laid claims to an autonomous literary scholarship (Steiner, 2014, p. 19) and tried to differentiate its discipline from other paradigms. However, from here on, the analogy grows less fitting.

First of all, Russian Formalists were not looking for the essence of literature in the machine but a priori assumed the essence in *the literary experience* (‘ostranenie’ or defamiliarization) and looked under the hood to study how the material functioned to cue that experience. This means that, according to the Russian Formalists, the essence of literature does not reside in material but in function or purpose, making Russian Formalism more functionalism than essentialism. As Erlich (1980) puts it: ‘Shklovsky came to define poetry not in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it is for’ (p. 179). Secondly, for Russian Formalists, claims about the essential qualities of literature (i.e. its defamiliarizing functioning) served methodological rather than ontological aims. Or, as Erlich puts it, the focus on form is a ‘matter of methodological expediency (...), a proposition about the critic’s main sphere of interest rather than about the nature of literary art’ (1980, p. 118). And finally, the literature machine that Russian Formalists speak of does not equal a hierarchically organized structure where one component is more central to its functioning than another (e.g. because rules regulate output) but instead consists of a set of interrelating devices, all of which are, at least in principle, equally important in cueing a reader’s defamiliarizing experience (see below under dominant).

This distinguishes a videogame formalism based on Russian Formalism from early works focused on (video)game form. As Willumsen (2018) notes, scholars like Eskelinen (2001) or Juul (2003) appear to have more ontological than methodological aims, trying to understand the nature and functioning of (video)games that set them apart from other media. And while these early works in game studies certainly explore a dominant user function (Aarseth, 1997; Eskelinen, 2001), this user function is less of an essence or methodological starting point (as defamiliarization is for the Russian Formalists) and more of a substantiation of an ontological focus on the underlying (and hierarchically organized) text producing machinery. In fact, with this focus on form through aesthetic experience, a videogame formalism in the Russian Formalist tradition has more in common with phenomenological works that look at videogame form through, and entangled with the player’s experience of embodiment (Keogh, 2018), performativity (Jayemanne, 2017) or affect (Anable, 2018). With the obvious difference being that, in the Russian Formalist tradition, the player experience has a clear focus on defamiliarization which functions as both the aesthetic result of, and the methodological departure point for engaging with the game machine to discover through what combination of game devices and player backgrounds the experience comes about.

A videogame formalism based on Russian Formalism should thus focus on 1) methodology over ontology, 2) function over material and 3) the interrelation of devices as they manifest themselves to the player over the internal hierarchical organization of these devices in the machine. So, rather than asking what a game is, this videogame formalism should be asking how a game works, or better yet, how

a specific game works to cue our aesthetic responses. Answering this question requires a grasp of what the functioning devices of games could be, in what categories they could be functioning and what devices and functions we should be focusing on during our analysis. This is what I will delve into in the three upcoming sections.

Functions of Game Devices

According to Shklovsky (2012), language and techniques like hyperboles or parallelisms that manipulate language can be used for practical everyday purposes as well as aesthetic purposes, but the interest of the literary scholar should lie in the latter. This means that, for Shklovsky, there is a distinction between language or, at an even more fundamental level, ‘words’ as *material* and specific techniques that shape this material in such a way that it turns from daily communication method into art. These techniques or artistic ‘uses of material’ is what Shklovsky (2012) calls *techniques* or *devices* (priëm). Thompson translates this distinction to film studies and argues that a film’s material of mise-en-scène, sound, camera/frame, editing and optical effects, can be manipulated with a range of techniques such as a specific use of lighting in the mise-en-scène or specific continuity editing for aesthetic purposes (as opposed to for instance advertising purposes in a TV commercial) (Thompson, 1981, p. 26).

Here, Mitchell’s work provides an excellent starting point for a further analysis of the many ways in which a game can evoke a defamiliarizing experience. Mitchell (2016) distinguishes three categories of devices capable of triggering a defamiliarizing experience: *undermining player expectations for control*, *disrupting the chronological flow of game time* and *blurring the boundaries of form*. In another publication by Mitchell et al. (2017), these three devices are supplemented with two more: *breaking the fourth wall* (metalepsis), and the *presence of the ‘unnatural narrator’*. And more recently, Chew and Mitchell (2019) identify 13 devices within the ‘player control category’, and Mitchell et al. (2020) suggest a total of five categories (*interaction, gameplay, agency, time and boundaries*) to identify a total of 26 different techniques that can evoke defamiliarization.

Of course, these devices will not function in the same way every time. Instead, the different types of devices function more as what Bordwell (1989a) has termed ‘hollow categories’ (p. 381), focusing the analysis without determining how we should understand their functioning in every case. Furthermore, functions of devices are highly dependent upon the context of play. This means that a player’s background knowledge and skills impact the poetic efficacy of a device since they allow the player to detect deviations from the norms of prior experience. This also means that in the Russian Formalist tradition, the machine is in no way divorced from its historical context and the reader engaging with it (see below).

Still, when looking at the pillars of Russian Formalism, some limitations of Mitchell et al.’s (2020) categories come to light. First, Mitchell et al.’s devices are very much centred on a defamiliarization of the form of the videogame itself. However, as Pötzsch (2017) and also Mitchell et al. (2020) recognize, Shklovsky’s (2012) idea of

defamiliarization can also be interpreted to include a renewal of habitualized perception of the world around us (see defamiliarization below). For example, while a game like *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008) is indeed defamiliarizing because it lacks the agency we have gotten used to in videogames, it is also defamiliarizing because it evokes a reflection on and potentially renewed understanding of the processes of growing old, losing loved ones and dying.

Secondly, Mitchell et al.'s categories veer heavily towards a more ludically focused approach to games where our expectations are concerned with goals, agency, controls and core mechanics and less so with conventions around storytelling, graphics, sound, framing etc.³ Of course, videogames can also thwart those conventions, for example, when *Passage*'s (Rohrer, 2007) unconventional thin long screen encourages reflection on how venturing of the beaten path in games and in life may be risky and unclear (but also potentially more rewarding). So, to broaden our understanding of the various ways in which game devices can function to evoke defamiliarization, I draw on Thomashevsky's (2012) idea of *motivation* below.

Motivation of Game Devices

The Russian Formalists consider a work to be a form of craftsmanship in which all devices will have a reason for being there. The reasons or justifications for being there are what Thomashevsky (2012) calls motivations. These motivations do not equate to authorial intent since Russian Formalists eschew a concentration on a romantic author figure. As Thompson explains it: 'motivation is, in effect, a cue given by the work that prompts us to decide what could justify the inclusion of the device' (Thompson, 1988, p. 16). In other words, to consider the motivation of a device, we only need the assumption of agency behind the presence of a device. Eventually, the motivations are drawn from the work itself by considering how a device functions in the overall structure of the work. This means that the motivation is not the justification given by the maker, but the justification given by the percipient on the grounds of the work's functioning.

Thomashevsky (2012) divides these motivations up into three basic categories: *compositional motivation*, *realistic motivation* and *artistic motivation*. Thompson extends these categories with one more: *transtextual motivation*. In Thompson's (1988) words, these categories can be explained as follows:

- '*compositional motivation* justifies the inclusion of the device that is necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space, or time' (p. 16).
- '*realistic motivation* (...) is a type of cue in the work leading us to notions from the real world' (p. 16).
- '*Transtextual motivation* (...) involves any appeal to conventions of other artworks' (p. 17) (e.g. genre conventions, previous work by the same actor or the use of certain techniques such as the cliff-hanger).

- ‘*Artistic motivation* (...) [concerns those devices that] contribute to the creation of the work’s abstract, overall shape – its form’ (p. 19). This is probably the most difficult type of motivation to define. The artistic motivation is often overshadowed by more prominent other motivations and it only really becomes noticeable when the other ones are withheld. Generally speaking, abstract stylistic devices that trigger non-straightforward (symbolic) meanings can be considered to have an artistic motivation.

These motivations can help to expand the categories of game devices beyond the more ludically oriented categories identified by [Mitchell et al. \(2020\)](#). In fact, many of the devices, discussed by Mitchell and his co-authors (2016; 2017; 2019; 2020), can be considered for these motivations. The non-chronological presentation of time in *Thirty Flights of Loving* ([Blendo Games, 2012](#)) or the unreliable narrator in *The Stanley Parable* ([Galactic Café, 2013](#)) has clear compositional functions since they help structure and create unconventional narrative events in time and space. The narrator in *The Stanley Parable* also has a clear realistic function since his commentary on player choice in games has us appeal to our real world play experiences, thereby breaking the fourth wall of the game. In fact, the narrator in *The Stanley Parable* also has a transtextual motivation because he explicitly plays with genre conventions that the player has learned from other games. Finally, the lack of a clear narrative or even game objectives in *The Graveyard* functions artistically since it leads to an artistic ambiguity in the game’s meaning. This is further emphasized by other artistically motivated devices such as the use of black and white in the game or the overlay of a close-up of the elderly woman’s face during the song.

Here, of course, these categories only take us so far. In line with [Mitchell et al.’s \(2020\)](#) categories of interaction, gameplay and agency, we should acknowledge that a game device may also be justified because it gives the player an opportunity to act, a goal to strive for or an opponent to battle. Here, I subsume [Mitchell et al.’s \(2020\)](#) categories focused on configurative user functions under the umbrella of *ludic motivation* (acknowledging that ludically motivated devices can still defamiliarize in a variety of ways as Mitchell et al. show):

- *Ludic motivation* justifies the inclusion of the device for facilitating players’ rule-bound, goal-directed progress in a game. A device that is ludically motivated should facilitate a specific subset of play where players acknowledge the game’s goals and strive for them actively while voluntarily subordinating themselves to a confining set of rules and challenges. A ludically motivated device facilitates play as a competitive process of winning and losing; it allows players to devise a strategy and execute it. This is not the broader play response we have with games, which may for instance also include the construction of a narrative out of the game’s formal clues. Instead, ludically motivated devices should be seen to facilitate play behaviour in a narrower sense which is often understood as ‘gameplay’ (e.g. [Lindley, 2002](#)).

Ludic motivations can of course be found in a score counter that indicates success with some abstract units or points, or more generally in abstract casual games where devices are often only there to encourage strategic gameplay. However, many times, ludic motivations will overlap with other motivations. As [Chew and Mitchell \(2019\)](#) argue, typical ludically motivated devices such as a known time limit or a high difficulty level only become poetic gameplay devices once the ludic functionality connects to another functionality such as when the stress or difficult challenges faced by the player correspond with the stress and challenges faced by an in game character.

The Dominant in Games

What makes the Russian Formalist and neoformalist consideration of devices specifically interesting for a study of games is that, at least in principle, these devices are all equally important in cueing our responses ([Bordwell 1985](#), p. 33). By considering game devices this way, we escape an emphasis on rules over narrative or stylistic devices, or a focus on ludic functionality in detriment of for instance narrative construction or transtextual references. As such, the approach gives us a balanced consideration of the plethora of different devices and their oftentimes multiple motivations for their inclusion in the work.

However, if we start from the basic premise that all devices are equally important in cueing our play responses, how do we determine which devices and motivations to focus on? Here, the idea of the *dominant* comes in handy. Thompson defines the dominant as ‘a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others’ ([1988](#), p. 89). On a global level, the dominant helps to focus on certain moments or elements that are important for the overall characteristics of the work (due to their salient relationship with genres or styles in other works). At a local level, where we single out a specific moment in the work, the dominant helps to focus on the more significant motivations during that moment (due to their role in the overall aesthetic effect of the work).

This idea of the dominant comes from a late phase in Russian Formalism in which the approach moved away from a purposive explanation of literature (triggering defamiliarization) to a more functional explanation in which all devices work together to shape the material towards an overall form ([Steiner, 2014](#), p. 63–66). According to Zirmunsky, it is not the critic’s task to individually study all devices for their defamiliarizing effects (as Shklovsky initially claimed and as Mitchell and his co-authors appear to be doing) but instead to study devices in their harmonious relationship in support of this overall form which Zirmunsky called *style* ([Steiner, 2014](#), p. 58). In this harmonious relationship, certain devices emerge as more important than others, giving focus to the critic.

While this idea of style sets us on course for the dominant, the dominant still differs in two distinct ways from Zirmunsky’s style. Firstly, the dominant is not characterized by harmony but by a struggle between foregrounded and subordinated devices ([Steiner, 2014](#), p. 89–90). Secondly, the dominant is determined by a work’s

distinguishing relationship to a larger literary system of genres, schools and styles rather than by the internal characteristics of the work (Steiner, 2014, p. 91–93). This means that it is the critic's task to establish the work's dominant on the basis of its difference from or resemblance with other works in its historical context to see which devices become foregrounded. The critic then focuses on those foregrounded devices in their relationship to the subordinated ones which in turn help to heuristically draw out other important devices.

Looking at Mitchell's (2016) analysis of *Thirty Flights of Loving*, we can for instance see how the game distinguishes itself by its mixture of media and genre conventions. This 'mixture' functions as a dominant that raises expectations on the basis of one set of conventions only to thwart those expectations by adhering to another set. Or, put differently, the game's dominant lies exactly in those moments of subordinated conventions which force players to step back from their expectations and see game elements in a new light. For example, the game starts off as a relatively straightforward shooter, signalling the WASD-controls, allowing for the traversal of space, opening of doors, jumping and picking up items like drinks and guns. However, players soon learn that drinks and guns cannot be stored and therefore never be used, thus breaking with those shooter conventions. Similarly, interacting with the side characters Anita and Borges in the opening scenes triggers a fast-paces montage introducing the characters' expertise (demolition expert, sharp-shooter, etc.) for an upcoming heist. But while this type of character introduction certainly fits with heist film conventions, we never participate in, see, or hear anything about the actual heist, thus also frustrating these conventions. Finally, prior experience of games has us expect a rather chronological and continuous presentation of events, especially during moments of interaction (Juil, 2004). However, also these conventions are quickly thwarted when the game presents us with jump-cuts during gameplay and a non-chronological editing of scenes.

In the end, the dominant gives us three important take-ways for game studies. First of all, it provides us with a heuristic but systematic way of focusing the analysis beyond intuition of the critic. This allows us to methodically draw out dominant user functions without having to individually study all devices and still helps to better understand a game and even hypothesize about dominant play experiences. Secondly, the dominant puts our analytical focus squarely on a struggle between game devices rather than a presupposed or sought-after harmony. This focus is important because it acknowledges that dissonances in games (where devices may have different conflicting motivations) should not be ignored as faulty game design but rather explored and exploited as interesting ways in which players are confronted with preconceived ideas about how games frame ludic action, tell stories, reference other works, etc. Finally, Zirmunsky helps to move the Formalist approach away from an aesthetic purism in which the work is teared from its social context and is interesting solely for its defamiliarizing effect, to a broader relational methodology in which the linkage to a social context is acknowledged and the aesthetic effect cannot be reduced to a single mechanism. This development is what I will discuss hereafter.

The Experience: Defamiliarization and Beyond

In their attempts to carve out their own scientific, autonomous literary discipline, scholars like Jakobson or Shklovsky were keen to demonstrate how literature distinguishes itself from other uses of language in practical everyday life. The argument is as simple as it is elegant. Where everyday life is characterized by economic perception and a practical use of language, literature is characterized by our difficult perception of it because its practical communicative function is moved to the background in favour of texture and sound (its form). In this argument, we perceive the world around us with a focus on practical day-to-day action (e.g. crossing the street, buying a sandwich) and use language in an aesthetically neutral way to communicate information. This means that our day-to-day understanding of the world is habitualized or automatized, making us blind to what Shklovsky (2012) calls the ‘artfulness of an object’ (p. 27). The purpose of art is then to make us see things again, not merely recognize them (Erich, 1980, p. 76). As Shklovsky has famously put it:

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (2012, p. 12).

As Pöttsch (2017) rightfully points out, Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization is ambiguous here (which Pöttsch makes especially apparent by comparing different translations of the closing sentence of this passage). On the one hand, Shklovsky suggests that the purpose of art is to defamiliarize the formal material of a work (words), to make form difficult and make artistic perception an end in itself. On the other hand, Shklovsky suggests that art’s purpose is to defamiliarize the outside world and eventually renew our habitualized day-to-day engagement with it. Pöttsch (2017) also sees this ambiguity reflected in Shklovsky’s own scholarly development. This means that in Shklovsky’s own thinking, defamiliarization shifts from something internal to the artistic reading process (making form difficult) to something that encapsulates the value of literature and the arts for our society at large (making the portrayed difficult). Therefore, this shift also means an increased recognition of the close connection between sound and meaning in literature (Erich, 1980, p. 87–98), with meaning becoming one of the formal components that artists have at their disposal to evoke an aesthetic effect.⁴ Depending on which understanding of defamiliarization one intends to follow, a videogame formalism in the Russian Formalist tradition can take two distinct forms.

First, when following Shklovsky’s early aesthetic purism, this videogame formalism becomes a theory of art, providing us with useful focus points for a study of ‘poetic gameplay’ devices (Mitchell, 2016). In this case, defamiliarization, as the

perception of (narrative, stylistic and rule-based) videogame material made difficult, is considered as the sole purpose of games as art, and it is the task of the critic to pinpoint those devices functioning to evoke that experience. Here, meaning is pushed back in favour of the appreciation of form; those moments during which our expectations around 'how games do things' are undermined and the machine is laid bare. So lighting is favoured over what is lit, plot structure is favoured over the story, sound and texture are favoured over what they represent and unexpected agency or end-states are favoured over the rhetoric of a game's possibility space and consequences.

Secondly, when following a later developmental phase in Russian Formalism, this videogame formalism becomes a broader analysis method in which the aesthetic play experience is not reduced to a single mechanism but includes meaning and, I would argue, experiences around ludic progression. In this formalism, as [Steiner \(2014\)](#) puts it, quoting Zirmunsky: 'The perception of the work is not limited to the pure enjoyment of self-centred devices but "implicitly it includes cognitive, ethical, or religious elements" (p. 63)'. In the case of games, meaning and ludic components become a more inherent part of the formal devices and are studied in their dominating or subordinated relationship to other devices to evoke defamiliarization. Here, the critic does not rely on an appreciation of the game's self-valuable material but looks for the struggle amongst narrative, stylistic and rule-based devices in all their motivational categories to see where the aesthetic experience derives from. In this struggle, certain devices and motivations are pushed back and make way for other ones in a continuous alternating process. In the end, the aesthetic experience can concern ludic progress, narrative composition, realism judgements, transtextual references, as well as the artistic appreciation of self-centred devices.

For example, there is a specific moment in *Bioshock 2* ([2K Marin, 2010](#)) where we are traversing the ocean floor until the music swells and we come to the edge of a cliff with a view of the underwater city of Rapture. During the traversing of the underwater space, a wide range of devices and functions are at play. The action abilities, the diving suite and spatial architecture, function ludically, compositionally, realistically and transtextually allowing for player progress to the next area, contributing to the identity of subject Delta (the player character) and the story of Rapture, and referencing old atmospheric diving suits and the story of Atlantis. These functions continuously alternate between dominant and subordinated until we get to the cliff edge when everything is pushed back to make way for the artistically motivated music and a view of the city. That particular moment cues us to appreciate the game as a crafted artefact. In this sequence, the game foregrounds different formal components that have us reflect on the notion of agency. Subject Delta's relative free will (compared to other Big Daddies), his diving suite, the building music, the framing of the city and the game's emphasis on choice (a near opposite focus compared to its predecessor) all have us expect a free exploration of the outsides of the city of Rapture. However, immediately after our view from the cliff's edge, we have those expectations thwarted by the linear gameplay, almost reminding us of the 'would you kindly' plot twist in the first *Bioshock* game.

Context: The Importance of Synchrony and Diachrony

Similar to Aarseth's (2004) early claims that games are somehow 'self-contained' (p. 48), the early Shklovsky was keen to tear art from its social context. However, just like Aarseth's claims, these early Formalist polemics are best seen as disciplinary flag planting. As Eichenbaum (2012) himself puts it: 'many of the principles advanced by the Formalists in the years of tense struggle were significant not only as scientific principles, but also as slogans, as paradoxes sharpened for propaganda and controversy' (p. 91). Early Formalism was thus characterized by its disassociation from other schools of literary criticism (focused on symbolism or authors). As such, the polemics fit the revolutionary times in Russia in which there was a general tendency to do away with the old (Erlich, 1980, p. 78–79).

For a more thoughtful consideration of the relationship between art and social context, we should be looking at the later stages of Russian Formalism when the initial polemics was subdued somewhat. In this later Russian Formalism, the artwork's 'form is always seen against the background of other works rather than by itself' (Eichenbaum, 2012, p. 90–91). This means that, as Steiner (2014) puts it, 'the identity of every literary fact is determined by sets of norms we call genres, schools, or historical styles' (p. 88). Only because a formal component shows similarities or in fact dissimilarities with a larger literary system, does it acquire its literary character. The task of the literary critic is then to understand this literary system *in time* and *over time*. Or, put differently, by looking into the work both synchronically and diachronically can Russian Formalists establish the literariness of a work and its devices.⁵

Synchronically, historical context functions as a methodological tool to gain shared access to a work by perceiving the work 'according to the norms prevailing at the given period' (Erlich, 1980, p. 48). For early Formalists, this means that a critic should invest effort into familiarizing him/herself with norms drawn from other artefacts making up the literary system because only then can s/he understand the tradition in which the work should reasonably be understood and recognize conventional or norm-challenging devices. For later Formalists also domains outside of the literary system had to be taken into account such as the technological, social, economic and cultural circumstances of its creation (Bordwell, 1989a, p. 382–383). Only then can a Formalist also recognize how a work may be breaking with technological constraints of its time, or – with meaning now being considered a part of a work's formal components – how a work may be challenging certain dominant social values.⁶

Positioning a game within its historical context in order to pinpoint its innovative or otherwise significant qualities is very common in videogame criticism. A book like *100 Greatest Video Game Franchises* (Mejia, Banks, & Adams, 2017) is filled to the brim with arguments that characterize a game in relationship to other games of its time (e.g. in terms of mechanics or storytelling conventions), but also other media or socio-political issues. However, aside from helping to foreground the more obvious norm-challenging characteristics, exploring a game's historical context can also help to gain

an understanding of a game that is more appropriate for its time. For example, according to Bradford (2009), we should not understand *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver, 2006) in the context of Rockstar's controversial predecessors but instead in a tradition of works that parody traditional school settings such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Hughes, 1857) or films like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, Jacobson, & Hughes, 1986) and *The Breakfast Club* (Tanen & Hughes, 1985). Situating the game in this context shows that the 'bullying' in the game actually functions to revolt against a representation of a stuffy conservative boarding school establishment and even how it helps to challenge class divides between the privileged rich 'preppies' and the less fortunate lower class students.

Diachronically, the interest of the Russian Formalist focuses on the movement of the literary system rather than on a specific historical period. This focus is important for several reasons. First of all, it helps to put the author genius back into her/his place subordinating her/him to the larger literary system of prevailing norms. In this understanding, the author functions merely as a subconscious generator of devices adhering to and/or challenging norms of its time to eventually help rejuvenate the system (Steiner, 2014, p. 110). Secondly, this diachronic focus helps to distinguish mistakes from literary innovation. By testing the literary deviation against the system, Russian Formalists can see whether it becomes implemented in more than a single accident thereby signalling literary change (Steiner, 2014, p. 103). And finally, and most importantly, diachrony ties into the idea of defamiliarization because Russian Formalists show how a linguistic fact can turn into a literary fact when it challenges the norms of a given period which itself eventually withers back into an automatized linguistic fact, and so on and so forth⁷ (Steiner, 2014, p. 103–105). As Shklovsky puts it: 'each art form travels down the inevitable road from birth to death; from seeing and sensory perception (...), to mere recognition' (in Erlich, 1980, p. 252).

Following from this last point, diachrony also helps to account for changes in perception over different periods of time in the sense that a device will become automatized after a while but can also regain relevance in a new context. For instance, the controversies around the first *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992) can be understood in light of the breaking of realism conventions (drawn from experiences with other games and other cultural artefacts) and technological constraints of its time (e.g. by using photographic sprites). Nowadays, however, we are not likely to be shocked by the pixelated representations of deaths in the game because our situatedness has changed and thereby our frame of reference.

In line with Russian Formalism, the formalist game critic thus takes form in the knowledge of aesthetic as well as social, cultural, economic and technical conventions in time and over time that s/he would reasonably draw upon to come to her/his understandings of the work (Thompson, 1981, p. 15). This comes close to the idea of an *implied* player, an adaptation of Iser's (1978) *implied reader*, by Aarseth (2007) and others (e.g. Vella, 2015; Van Vught & Glas, 2018). This player consists of 'a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to "exercise its effect"' (Aarseth, 2007, p. 132). This is not an ideal player who always performs the same activities in

service of the game since that would deny the possibility of different readings in different historical contexts. However, neither is the player an actual person whose personal background leads to an idiosyncratic understanding of the game since that would detach the player from his/her historical context where certain established norms are shared. The player is thus a ‘hypothetical entity’ that does not exist as wholly in the work but as a historically shared point outside of it that is referred to by the work (Thompson, 1988, p. 29).

Conclusion: Towards a Robust Videogame Formalism

This article has tried to move the discussions around formalism in game studies beyond a cursory understanding of its history. By providing an overview of the core pillars of Russian Formalism, I hope to have shown what a videogame formalism can look like that is anchored in a clear and robust theoretical tradition which can help move these discussions forward and make our formalist analyses of videogames more fine-grained, consistent and convincing.

A videogame formalism based on Russian Formalism focuses on the game rather than the external circumstances of its creation while still acknowledging the importance of the play experience and the game’s historical context. By considering the game as a machine, the approach is focused on how the game works rather than on what it is or what it means. By equating form to function, form is distinguished from material to also include the aesthetic player response. Understanding how a game works means asking: what are the reasons for its devices being here? These reasons, or motivations function as categories for the functioning of devices and can be divided up into ludic, compositional, realistic, transtextual and artistic. Many devices will be functioning in a combination of these categories and will be struggling with one another for dominance in eliciting the player’s response.

In this videogame formalism, the aesthetic game experience of the player is intertwined with game form and functions as the methodological starting point for doing the analysis. It becomes the task of the formalist game critic to establish which combination or clash of devices is functioning in which way to evoke our aesthetic game experience. This aesthetic experience can be considered very specifically as the experience of defamiliarization (or *ostranenie*) of abstract form which turns this videogame formalism into a theory of art, interested in how formal techniques create what Mitchell (2016) terms poetic gameplay. However, in line with more eclectic Russian Formalists, we can also approach our defamiliarizing responses more broadly as a range of cognitive, behavioural, perceptual and emotional experiences. This makes videogame formalism a broader methodology allowing us to analyse a variety of formal techniques capable of shaping our defamiliarizing play experiences on all accounts of ludic progression, narrative construction, realism judgements, transtextual references and artistic experiences.

Finally, also historical context plays an important part in establishing the workings of a game’s devices. Addressing the game in its synchronic historical perspective

helps us see conventional and norm-challenging devices and gain intersubjective access to the game by drawing on a limited, shared and game-invoked reference point. Addressing the game in a diachronic perspective helps to distinguish aesthetic innovation from mistakes, but also account for different play experiences of the same game over time.

As I noted in the introduction, formalisms (in one form or another) have received quite a bit of criticism over the years. This fits with a turn in game studies where questions around play experiences and (material) contexts of play are often considered more important or interesting than understanding the formal properties of game systems (e.g. Apperley & Jayemanne, 2012; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008, p. 166). In these criticisms, formalisms are supposedly too much focused on rules to the exclusion of story; too much focused on form to the exclusion of players or too much focused on essential properties of what games are rather than on the many different experiences that games can facilitate (Juul, 2015).

However, what I hope to have shown here is that these criticisms do not hold for a videogame formalism based on a Russian Formalist tradition. By doing just that, this article may go some way towards reviving formalism as an approach to videogames (while immediately acknowledging that it is of course limited in what it can do). After all, this videogame formalism certainly addresses narrative and stylistic components of games, has methodological rather than ontological aims and takes players and context to be intertwined with the form of the game machine.

In the end, of course, the historical account presented here is limited and selective. So, one may well disagree with the choices made, the emphases put and the corners cut. But in good Russian Formalist tradition, I welcome such disagreements as an eristic way of refining the approach. So, rather than being a conclusive rigid framework, I hope this article will be read in that spirit: as a thoughtful starting point for the further development of a more robust videogame formalism.

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Notes

1. Aside from the obvious Russian Formalists of the 1920s, the label is often used for the mid 20th century school of New Criticism in the US with scholars such as Wimsatt and Beardsley

famously arguing against the intentional and affective fallacy (1946, 1949). Furthermore, formalism is also used for scholarship in philosophical aesthetics in which the term often stands for the general principle of *l'art pour l'art* or the fact that an analysis of (pictorial) art should focus on formal components (colour, line, texture, etc.) alone since an artwork's value and meaning is inherent in those components (see Dowling, 2013). Also structuralism has been branded a formalism from time to time (and vice versa) which is no surprise given their shared interest in finding core features of the literary work and common members like Jakobson or Bogatyrev (Erlich, 1980, p. 154–168; Steiner, 2014, p. 25–28).

2. It should be noted here that neoformalism focuses exclusively on the literary approach and discards the Russian Formalists' own works on film. In fact, Thompson is very adamant in her dismissal of the work by Russian Formalists on film, arguing it was too much focused on exploring the parallel between cinema and language, which Thompson sees as an incorrect and unconstructive way of looking at cinema (1981, 31).
3. I should note that this may just be an issue with Mitchell et al.'s categorization since many of the devices they discuss within those categories suggest a much broader approach to games (as I will show in the following section).
4. Here, meaning was still subsumed under function (to defamiliarize) making Russian Formalism a poetics rather than a hermeneutics (Culler, 1997, 61–62). This also distinguishing a videogame formalism in this tradition from works that see 'reading' or interpreting a game as its main critical activity (e.g. Bogost, 2007; Treanor et al., 2011; Treanor 2013).
5. I should add that the terms synchrony and diachrony are used here only for methodological expedience, that is, to help direct attention of the critic to the game during a specific moment in time (drawing on shared context) as well as over time (acknowledging the changing position of the work in different contexts). This is different from for instance Jayemanne (2017, 2020) who employs the terms for the characterization and segmentation of play performances (2017) and temporal frames (2019).
6. This clash of preconceived social values with the values built into the videogame system comes close to Bogost's (2006) understanding of simulation fever. However, where Bogost (2006) sees assumptions about social values as personal (p. 99), Russian Formalists considers them as shared in time and changing over time.
7. Amongst Russian Formalists, there was some disagreement on what caused literary change and therefore also on what counts as historical context. According to the more orthodox Russian Formalists, literary change was self-propelled in the sense that 'new form arises (...) because old form has exhausted its potentialities' (Shklovsky in Erlich, 1980, p. 254). This means that the Formalist critic has no business outside of the literary system of norms. According to later Russian Formalists however, literary change was as much self-propelled as it was caused by external factors. Zirmunsky and Engelhardt for instance argued that while automatization of literary devices can provide the spark that ignites literary rejuvenation, the direction of change must be sought in the larger cultural atmosphere of the time period (Erlich, 1980, p. 255). For these scholars, historical context concerns domains both inside and outside of the literary system.

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