

# REVIEW: PLAYING AT A DISTANCE: BORDERLANDS OF VIDEOGAME AESTHETIC

 **CATARINA VIEIRA**

Universidade Católica Portuguesa,  
School of Arts  
Research Center for Science and Technology  
of the Arts  
catarina.vieira.28@hotmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Sonia Fizek's *Playing at Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic* navigates the intricate intersection of digital technology, aesthetics, and play in the context of video games, challenging conventional ideas of player agency. This critical recension delves into the book's contributions, highlighting its innovative exploration of mediated distance, interactivity, delegation, automation, ambience, spectacle, and the evolving nature of player engagement. While acknowledging its theoretical depth, this review emphasizes the book's significance in reshaping our understanding of video game aesthetics and the complex relationship between humans, machines, and digital play.

Keywords: Video games; Digital play; Automation; Interactivity.



Sonia Fizek explores the complex convergence of digital technology, aesthetics, and play within the realm of video games in her work, *Playing at Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. In this exploration, Fizek investigates how mediated distance permeates technology, aesthetics, and play within video games. As technology continues to reshape the boundaries of digital play, Fizek navigates the idea of a nuanced landscape of mediated distance, delving into fields such as automation, ambience, and the evolving nature of player engagement, while challenging conventional notions of player agency, interaction, and the evolving nature of digital play. With an interdisciplinary approach that draws from media theory, digital humanities, philosophy, and game studies, Fizek's book offers a comprehensive perspective on the subject.

This critical recension aims to dissect the book's key arguments, assess its contributions to game studies, and consider its implications for our understanding of digital play. At its core, *Playing at Distance* is a treatise on the concept of mediated distance. Fizek invokes Albert Einstein's notion of "spooky action at a distance"<sup>1</sup> as a thematic anchor, (Einstein et al., 1935) setting the stage for a rigorous examination of how mediated distance shapes the aesthetics of video games. The book is structured into six chapters, each delving into distinct facets of mediated distance in video games, such as interpassivity, delegation, automation, ambience, and spectacle. Fizek's journey begins by challenging the conventional emphasis on interactivity in digital media discourse, effectively dismantling the oversimplified narrative that has characterized discussions in the field: the author asserts that the fixation and exclusive

<sup>1</sup> Refers to the notion that separate objects are able to share a condition or state.

focus on interactivity overlooks the multifaceted ways individuals engage with technology and games, making it a crucial point of departure for her broader argument.

Following up, Fizek's exploration of the mind-body gap (and its implication for digital media consumption) challenges the notion that only digital media necessitate cognitive engagement (referring to active engagement and player agency). Additionally, it tackles the dichotomy between interactivity and passivity by emphasizing the cognitive engagement required in various media forms, including literature and film. This perspective is a powerful rejoinder to the notion that only digital media necessitate active participation. The author argues that this emphasis on agency overlooks the importance of technology and mediated distance in shaping the gaming experience. Drawing parallels between self-playing pianos of the past and contemporary video games, Fizek suggests reconsidering the significance of action and inaction, engagement, and detachment, in the realm of digital play. Interactivity, while crucial, cannot encapsulate the diverse forms of engagement with technology and games. A strict interactivity framework, according to the author, is short-sighted and thus, Fizek introduces alternative concepts such as "interpassivity" and "delegation" that offer a richer understanding of digital play by highlighting different ways of approaching the act of playing.

Fizek's journey continues with a focus on interpassive play, where players delegate much of the gameplay to the game itself. Idle games, such as *Cookie Clicker* (2013), *Clicker Heroes* (2014) and *Godville* (2007), are listed as examples. Idle games challenge established norms by blurring the lines between active and passive engagement, as players automate repetitive tasks and embrace delegation. Moreover, the historical context of idling, from early 1980s IRC chat clients to contemporary idle games, provides a rich backdrop for understanding the evolution of this form of play. Fizek's chapter on interpassive play effectively highlights the profound shift from active engagement to delegation, showcasing how the idea of active participation/engagement as the key sign that tells videogames apart from other media can be considered narrow-sighted.

Automation in video games is another critical topic discussed, emphasizing the blurring boundaries between active and passive engagement in the digital age. The evolution of player roles in the gaming ecosystem is underscored, exemplifying the interconnected relationship between players and automated systems, particularly in the context of AI-driven simulations and virtual worlds (Fizek, 2018). Fizek then connects automation in gaming and historical milestones by looking at cases such as *Deep Blue's* chess victory, highlighting the historical precedent for automation in entertainment. The chapter further explores the concept of automated play in the context of repetitive actions, particularly in MMORPGs<sup>2</sup> (Paoli, 2013). In this context, Fizek insightfully discusses the use of bots and mods to automate gameplay, highlighting the ethical dilemmas surrounding automation in gaming. Furthermore, the ongoing

<sup>2</sup> Massive(ly) multiplayer online role-playing game.

discussion of the use of AI in games, where autonomous agents contribute to the illusion of a living game world, elucidates the symbiotic relationship between human players and automated systems. In this sense, Fizek successfully conveys the evolving role of human players in automated play, where they often assume indirect roles and bear witness to the agency of the system.

Fizek moves on to introduce the concept of “ambient play”, examining how digital media, including video games, can transform into background experiences requiring minimal interaction. Fizek proposes two distinct types of ambience: operational ambience, related to background processes and algorithms, and affective ambience, concerned with mood and atmosphere. The author then provides examples like *Dreeps* (2015), *Everything* (2017) and *Mountain* (2014), all games that promote in-game tasks that are completed without the player actively participating, to illustrate ambient play. The discussion of *Homo distractus* (Hediger, 2015) adds a socio-cultural dimension to this form of play, suggesting that it caters to a digital age characterized by dispersed and undirected attention. The exploration of "slow technology" challenges the prevailing focus on efficiency and productivity in technology design, emphasizing moments of reflection and mental rest.

The philosophical concept of "intra-action" (in the context of video games) is also tackled in the book, drawing from Karen Barad's agential realism (Barad, 2003). With this idea in mind, Fizek challenges traditional notions of players and games as distinct, pre-defined entities and argues that they emerge and unfold within the act of play itself, inextricably linked and mutually entangled. This perspective reshapes our understanding of the player-game relationship, emphasizing the fluidity of boundaries and intricate relations among different agents involved in gameplay. The text's application of quantum physics experiments, such as Niels Bohr's observations, adds depth to the exploration of agential realism by highlighting how the act of observation influences what is observed, permitting Fizek to challenge the notion of objective, pre-existing entities in video games and emphasizing the dynamic, co-constituted nature of play. However, despite of agential realism being consistent with quantum mechanics, it does not capture what quantum mechanics in any strict sense implies for social science or any other domain of inquiry, making it solely interesting from the perspective of social theorizing. (Faye & Jaksland, 2021)

To tackle the last concept, spectated play, Fizek explores the act of watching and observing video games as a unique form of entertainment and spectacle. The author highlights the need for a different kind of visual literacy compared to other media forms, with a focus on how digital technology shapes the act of watching and engaging with video games. Taking into account we are living in the age of livestreaming and esports, where viewers actively watch others play games on platforms like Twitch, vicariously experiencing them (Kohls et al., 2023), spectated play becomes pivotal when looking at the act of play and at how video games can be perceived and understood. Fizek introduces the concept

of technical and operational images, emphasizing that video game images are deeply intertwined with the computational processes of the game, challenging traditional distinctions between representation and computation.

Reflecting on the overarching theme of distance in play, the author emphasizes the need for a new vocabulary and conceptual framework to understand the shifting aesthetics of digital play. Fizek encourages a reflective and critical approach to understanding the cultural values and realities embedded in video games and the ethical implications of delegation and automation in digital environments. *Playing at Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic* is a ground-breaking work that redefines our understanding of digital play. Sonia Fizek's interdisciplinary approach enriches the subject matter, urging readers to re-evaluate their perspectives on play, aesthetics, and technology's role in shaping the player-game relationship in the digital age. In conclusion, Fizek's work invites further exploration into the dynamic relationship between humans and technology within this ever-evolving medium.

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