

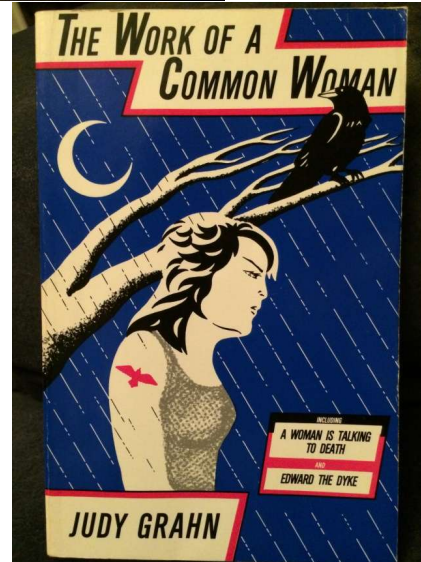
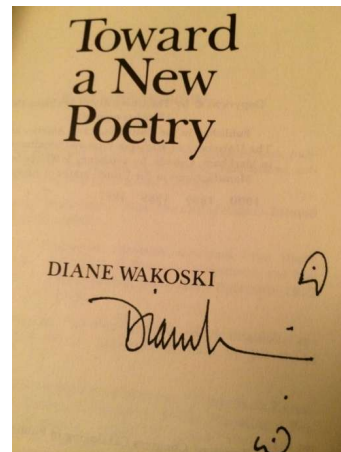
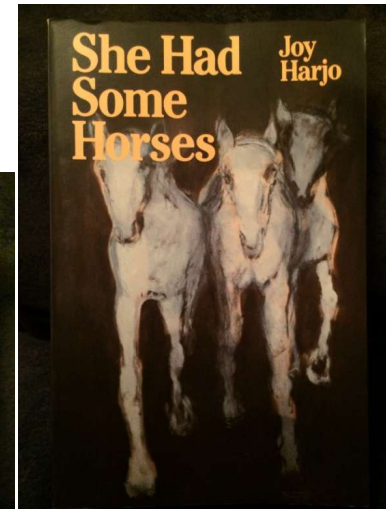
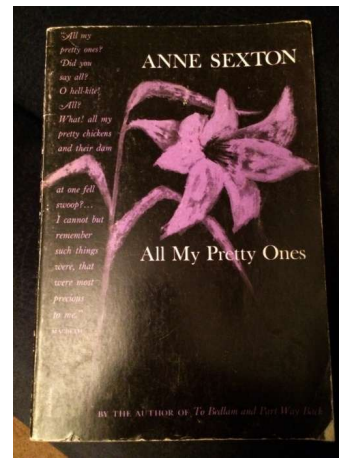
A new formalism

Raph Koster

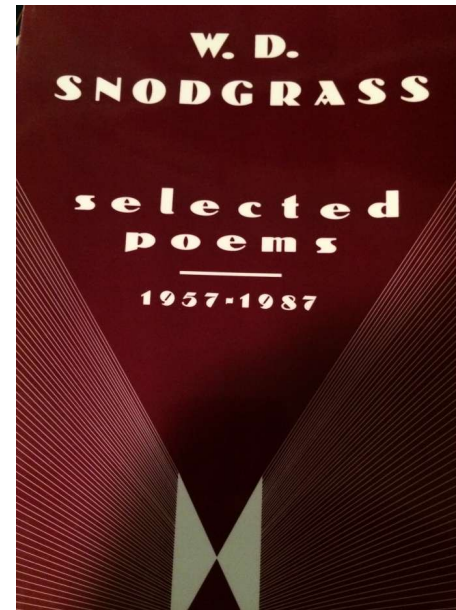
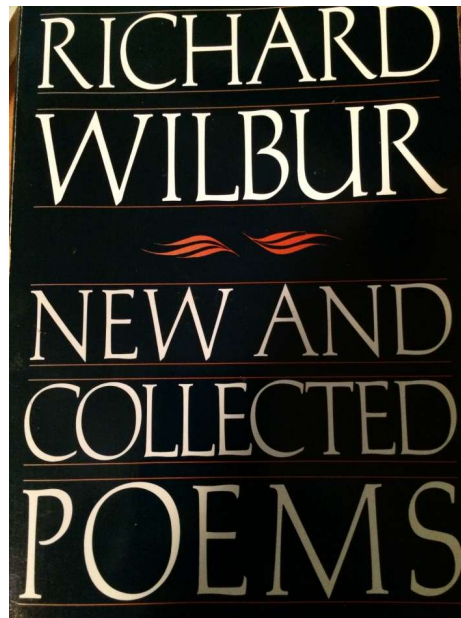
I'm here to represent the formalists!

New formalism is a term from poetry. I like poetry. I reference it in talks like these. I write poetry, sometimes. I have a poetry sheepskin. Poetry is nice, and kind of irrelevant. It doesn't make a good reference point for people usually because nobody, not even most poets, reads poetry, unless they are forced to.

- Some books off my shelf



Back when I was in college, we railed against what we called “me poetry.” It was a confessional moment in culture, you see, and for that matter, I think every poet coming out of high school is probably writing confessional poetry, it’s almost like a law of nature... just like it is a sort of a law of nature that if you are a student, you have to rail mightily against whatever the prevailing winds are. That’s part of your role, to be the rebel.



New Formalism, then, was a rebellion. It was already an old rebellion when we came along. Poetry movements happen in very slow motion; this was people like Dana Gioia and Dick Allen and Snodgrass rebelling against

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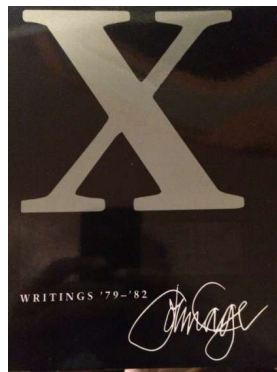
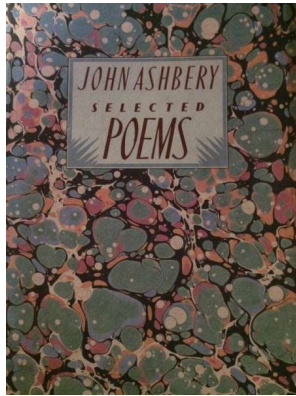
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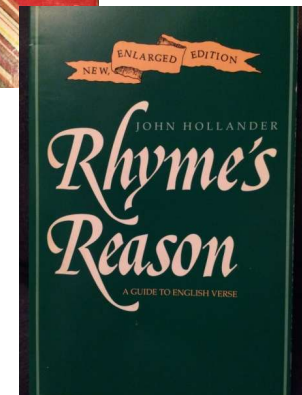
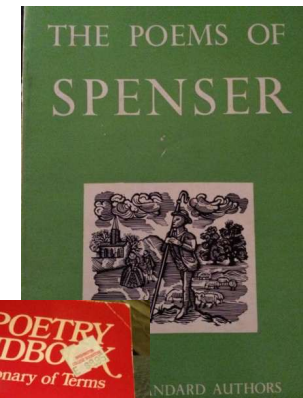
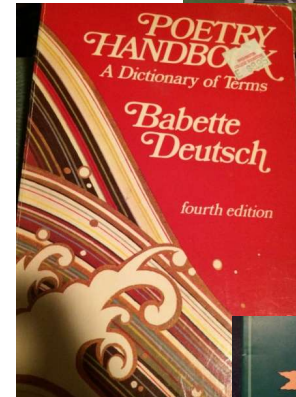
- Susan Howe, from *Singularities*

language poetry and concrete poetry,



- John Ashbery
- John Cage

VERSUS



Ashbery or even Whitman. So we are talking a fifty year old rebellion against a hundred year old trend, and the way it rebelled was by reaching back even further, to formal verse techniques from five hundred years prior.

DANA GIOIA

Notes on the New Formalism

1

Twenty years ago it was a truth universally acknowledged that a young poet in possession of a good ear would want to write free verse. Today one faces more complex and problematic choices. While the overwhelming majority of new poetry published in the U.S. continues to be in “open” forms, for the first time in two generations there is a major revival of formal verse among young poets. The first signs of this revival emerged at the tail end of the seventies, long after the more knowing critics had declared rhyme and meter permanently defunct. First a few good formal books by young poets like Charles Martin’s *Room For Error* (1978) and Timothy Steele’s *Uncertainties and Rest* (1979) appeared but went almost completely unreviewed. Then magazines like *Poetry Review*

We can call that a kind of conservatism, I suppose. Gioia kicked off the naming of the movement by complaining not just about confessionalism but about “unmusicality” in the language used. I mean, talk about missing the point of language poetry and concrete poetry, to complain about its lack of musicality, instead of celebrating its physicality, right?

The Altar

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
 Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
 No workman's tool hath touched the same.⁴

A HEART alone
 Is such a stone,
 As nothing but
 Thy power doth cut.
 Wherefore each part
 Of my hard heart
 Meets in this frame,
 To praise thy Name:

That, if I chance to hold my peace,
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.⁵
 Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
 And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

5

10

15

1633

But the picture isn't that simple... For one, George Herbert showed us centuries ago that physicality and musicality can coexist just fine. It's not like these are even on an axis or anything.

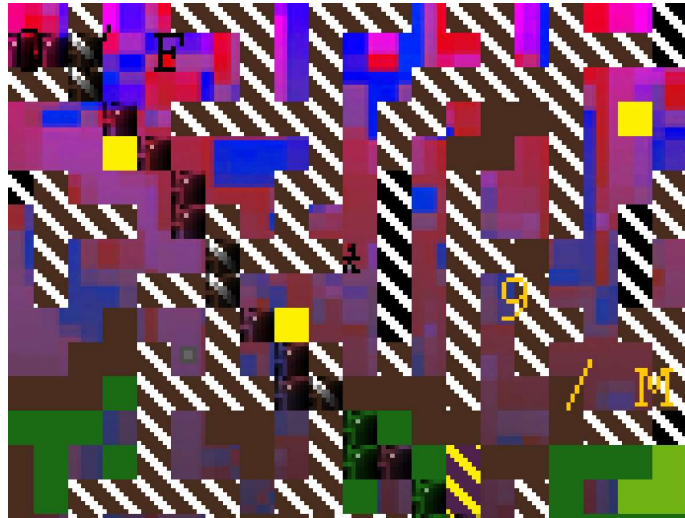
New Realism: Edward Hopper



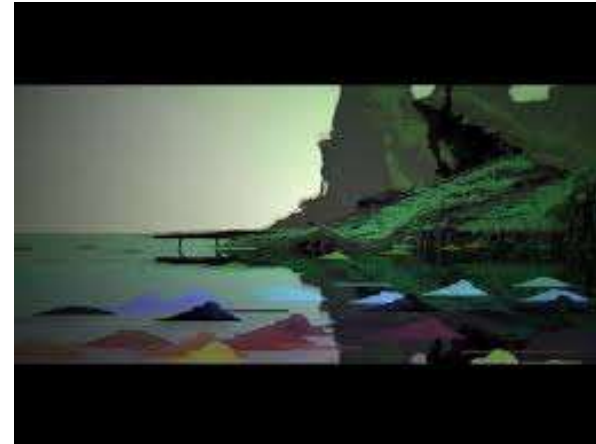
Modern photorealistic drawings, Paul Cadden

For another, we can call harking back to the extreme past radical, similar to how New Realism in painting is upending abstraction but also the forms of representation that have grown common.

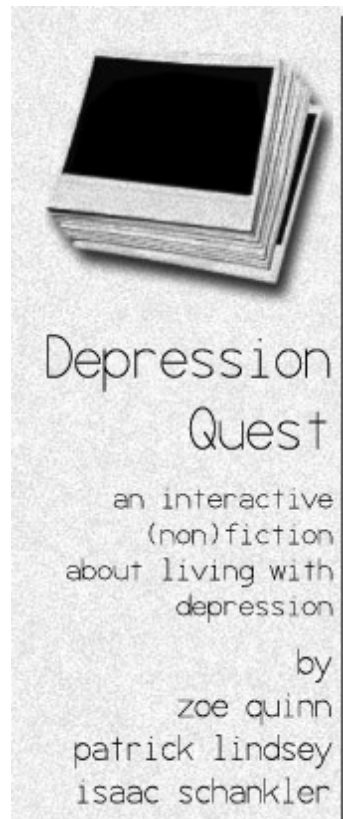
Problem
Attic, Liz
Ryerson



*“DEIOS IS A GLITCHVENTURE
VIDEO ARTWORK +ALBUM
COMBINATION SHOWING THE
GRAND NARCISSISTIC WORKS
OF THE POET KING OF
ART. BERING”*



A lot of art games and indie games feel analogous to language poetry,



- Depression Quest

- That Dragon, Cancer



Or to confessionalism, and frankly, we could probably link a curmudgeonly statement like “unmusicality” to curmudgeonly statements like “not a game.”

- Angry Birds, Flappy Bird, Candy Crush Saga



Another lens, though, is that New Formalism was actually a populist movement, seeking to reclaim an audience for poetry using the strengths that it had once had – much like casual games are populist in very large part because they eschew heavy narrative and presentation elements and focus strongly on a systemic core. And in that sense, it wasn't that far out of tune with the culture as a whole. It suffered, probably, from being too much a movement of older white men,

- Folk singers from 80s (clockwise)

- Suzanne Vega
- Bill Morrissey
- Tracy Chapman
- Greg Brown
- Indigo Girls
- Patty Larkin



Given that the same impulses did actually lead to a “classical” poetic revival, just in the form of a small singer-songwriter resurgence,



- Tarin Towers, lives down the street from here. We workshopped together back in college.

Slam poetry,

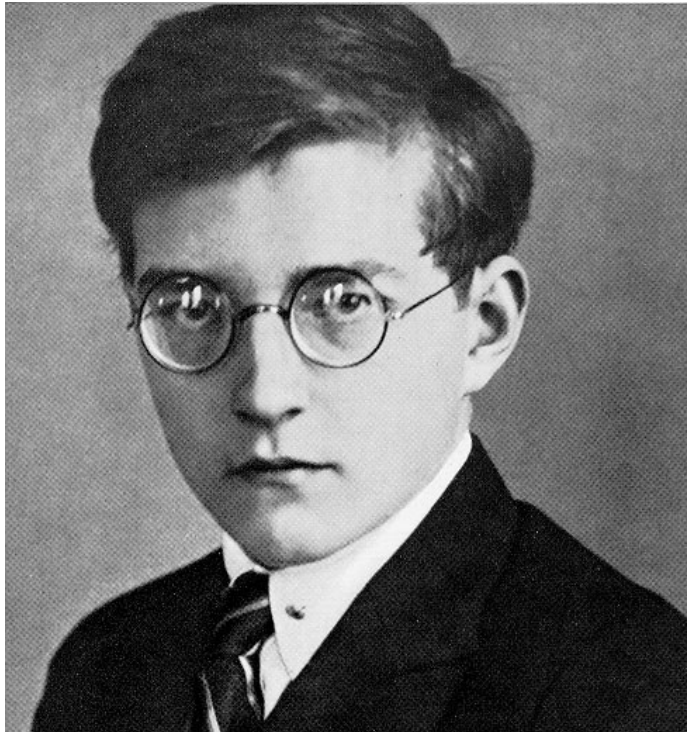


Members of Run DMC, and Dr Dre, 1983

And hip hop.

All of which have more in common with New Formalism than they do with the avant garde of poetry at that time, or even the widely accepted contemporary poet canon of that period.

- Shostakovich before GDC



- ...and after

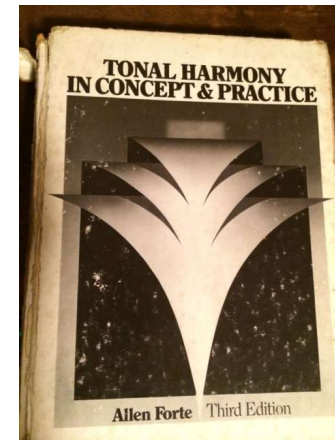


Formalism in games was a label imposed from outside the supposed formalists. In music, it's applied to the avant garde composers like Shostakovich. Which raises two important points:
That usually the avant-garde is associated with the formalist mode of thinking, so it is sort of weird that in games it's associated with the reverse

That formal terms are always bounded, always occur within a deep context of practice and culture. What is formal to one is very informal to another, and the use of a given word within the context of Stalinist Russia can have deeply different implications when it is heard – not even used, just heard – by someone in another field, time, or place.

Some ways to analyze

- Music can be analyzed in
 - Chords (harmonic analysis)
 - Melody (melodic analysis)
 - Rhythm (rhythmic analysis)
 - Timbre and sound (spectroscopic analysis)
 - Performance (coaching, critique)
 - Experience (reviews)
 - Cultural criticism (music criticism)



If we leave the poetry aside for a moment and use music as an analogy, these are all ways of looking at music, of doing music criticism.

Harmonic analysis

- Chord progressions for All Along the Watchtower as written by Bob Dylan:

Am, Am/G, F, G

- Chord progression as played by Hendrix:

C#m, B, A, B

This is “All Along the Watchtower” – the Dylan original, versus the Hendrix take, wherein we can see via the chords that Hendrix actually turned a passing note into a full chord. Harmonic analysis shows us how these are actually pretty different.

All Along The Watchtower

Words & Music by Bob Dylan

Always moving on (♩ = c. 120)



There must be some kind of way
out of here," said the jo-ker to the thief. There's too much con-fu-sion,
I can't get no re-lief. Bus-'ness-men, they drink my wine, plough-men dig my earth.
None will ser-ve on the line, no-bod-y of it is worth. Hey...

But of course melodic analysis says they are the same. After all, this here is also "All Along the Watchtower."

Michael Hedges

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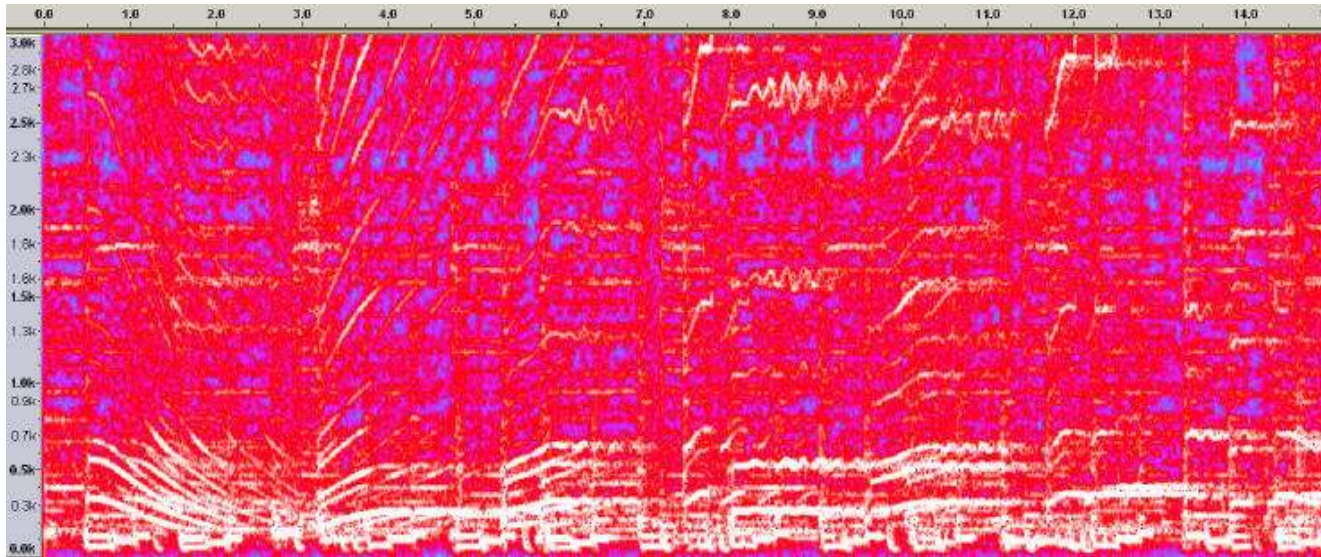
• Harm.
• |-----|-----|-----7h-----|-----|
• |-----|-----|-----7h-----|-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|--22---2---2-|-0--0-7h-----|-0H2--22P0-----|
• |--0---0-0-----|--00---0---0-|-0--0-----|-0---00-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|--22---2---2-|-0--0-----|-0H2--22-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|--22---2---2-|-0--0-----|-0H2--2-----|
•   1.2 . 3 . 4 .   1. 2 .3. 4 . 1.2. 3 . 4 .   1 . 2. 3 . 4 .
•
•
• Harm.
• |-----|-----|-----12h-----|-----|
• |-----|-----|-----12h-----|-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|-0H2-----2P0-----|-0--0--12h-----|-0H2--22P0-----|
• |--0---0-0-----|-0-----0-0-----|-0--0-----|-0-----00-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|-0H2-2---2-----|-0--0-----|-0H2--22-----|
• |--4---4-4-----|-0H2-2-----|-0--0-----|-0H2--22-----|
•   1.2 . 3 .4 .   1 . 2 . 3 . 4 .   1.2.   3 . 4 .   1 . 2.3 . 4 .
•
•
• Vamp/Solo: (two times)
•
• [Knock]
• |--9-9---9--9--9--9---|--7-7-7-7-7---|-5-5-5-5-5-5--0|-----|
• |--9-11-11-11-11-9---|--7-9-9-9-7---|-5-5-5-5-5H7--0|-----|
• |--9-9--9---9--9--9---|--7-7-7-7-7---|-5-5-5-5-5-5--0|-----|
• |--9-9--9---9--9--9---|--7-7-7-7-7---|-5-5-5-5-5-5--0|---0-0-0-----|
• |--9-----|---7-----|-5-----0|-0H2-2-2-----|
• |-----|-----|-----0|-0H2-2-2-----|
•   1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 .

```



And then you have stuff like the Michael Hedges cover. Same melody, but radically different rhythmic pattern to it.

- Spectrogram analysis (the Hendrix version)



A producer might well be much more interested in a spectrogram analysis to see whether the transients are punchy enough.

Some ways to analyze

- Music can be analyzed in
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 - Melody (melodic analysis)
 - Rhythm (rhythmic analysis)
 - Timbre and sound (spectroscopic analysis)
 - Performance (coaching, critique)
 - Experience (reviews)
 - Cultural criticism (music criticism)

And then there's a critique of someone on American Idol butchering the song, or a review of a new version, or the stuff that I think most game criticism is currently oriented around, which is criticism that connects back out to the larger culture. For example, it might be talking about the way in which the Indigo Girls reinvented the track with a sizable break in the middle, transforming it pretty radically and removing it from its extant context.



Game grammar, which is the sort of formalism associated with all these folks, pretty much all fits down at the lower end of this. It's about the harmony and melody of games, which are the most mechanical pieces and also the hardest to see.

The Five Fighting Games

- Rock Paper Scissors.
- Karate Champ.
- Karateka.
- Battle Arena Toshinden.
- Bushido Blade.

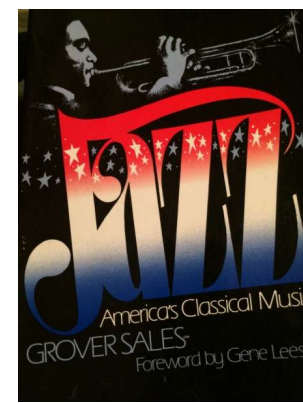
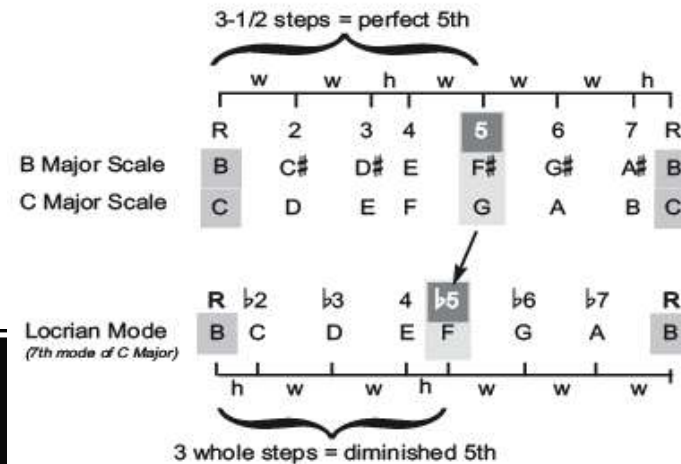
(all others are “clones.”)

(in one way of looking at it)

Mechanical bits tend to be invariant across huge swaths of games. By this lens, most of Saints Row IV is pretty much exactly the same as GTA IV, there have only been five fighting games ever, and Gone Home is a game about turning over cards in a fairly fixed order to read what is on the other side. What most criticism calls “a genre,” this most rigid of lenses might actually call “all the same game” or “variants.”



But that's OK, because as has been said by everyone from Woody Guthrie on, all you need is three chords and the truth to get a message across. Many great pieces of music have been written with a I-IV-V progression, after all. And knowing that a song can be placed in "the blues" actually imparts a whole large dimension to criticism of it. It fits it into a cultural framework, certainly.



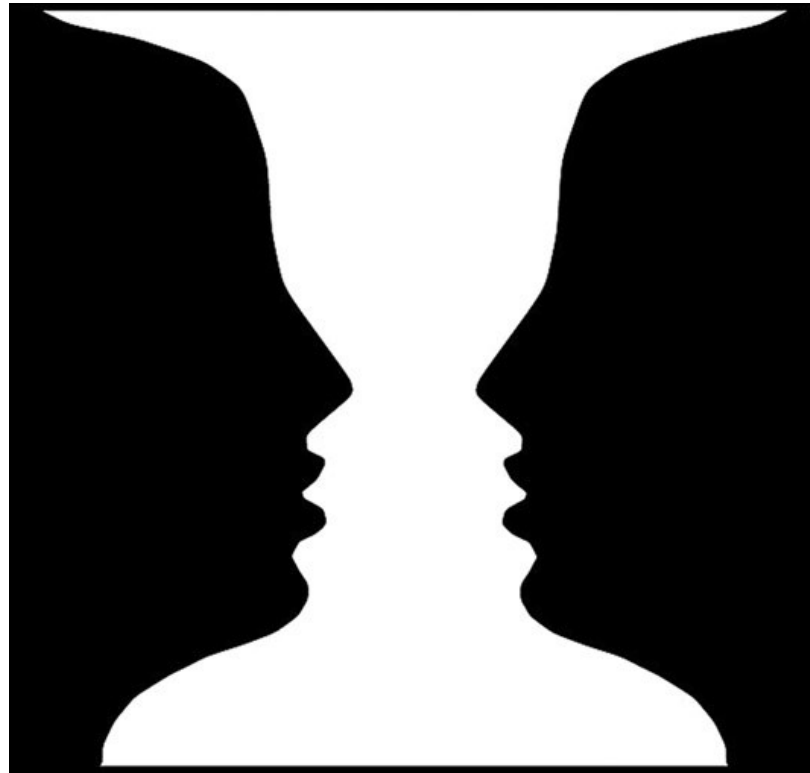
They're not particular about whether you're playing a flatted fifth or a ruptured 129th as long as they can dance to it.

(Dizzy Gillespie)

izquotes.com

The first lens that I think this sort of incredibly rigid and dry way of looking at things helps is in any form of historiography efforts. You cannot trace the development of jazz without following one particular note, the flatted fifth, in its winding journey from African scales to bent notes and thence to reclaiming the tritone or “devil’s interval” from its disdained position in the Western music orthodoxy.

That journey is cultural, political, AND technical, and cannot be understood outside of the intersection of all those lenses.



Another way where formal-style bright lines help is in creating negative space.

- # BOLERO

Transcription
pour Piano à 2 mains
par ROGER BRANGA

MAURICE RAVEL

Temps de Bolero, moderato assai (4-72)

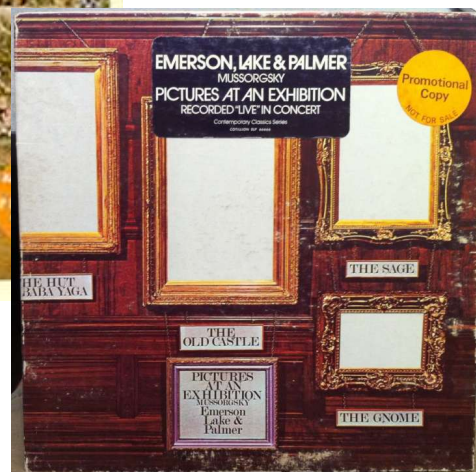
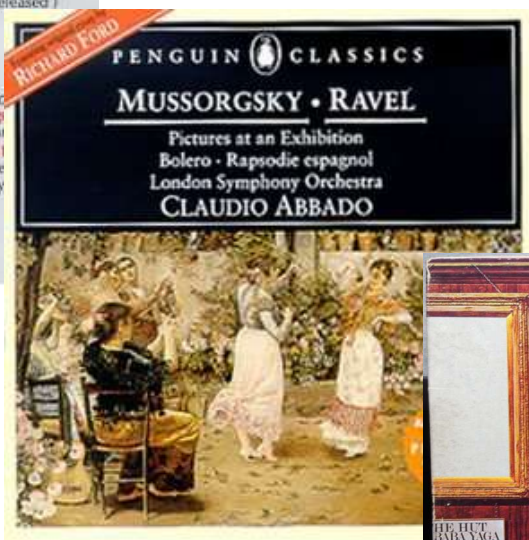
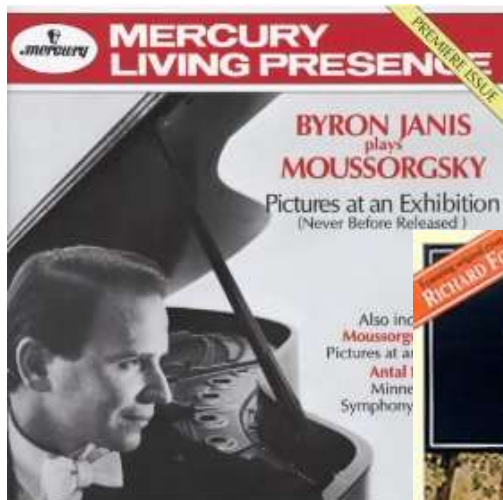
W: Le passage entre les 2 lignes W et B est fait, dans l'original, quatre fois de suite, par différents instruments, commençant pp et augmentant jusqu'à ff

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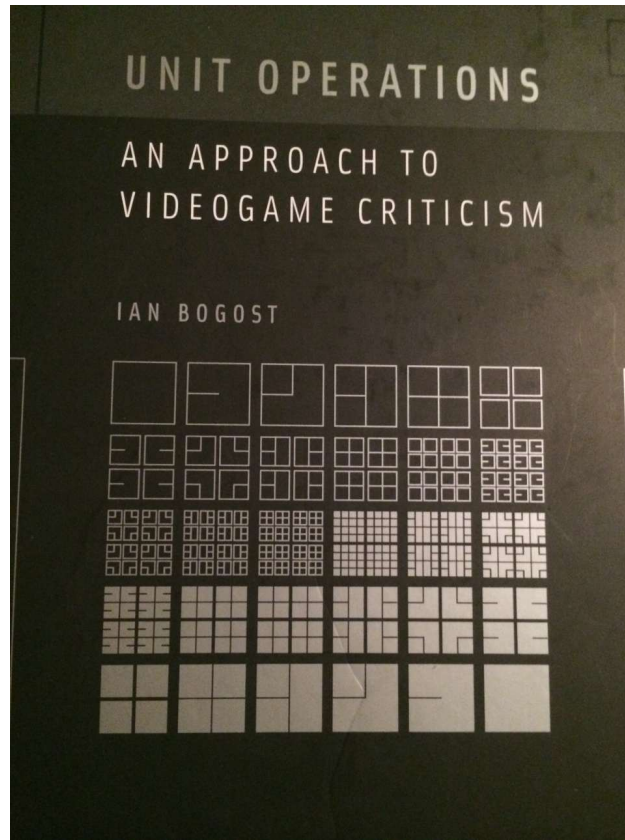
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27



There's vast scope in dynamics – Using a formalist lens that regards the harmony and melody as distinct from the performance and the timbres, you can actually peel away the bones these have in common in order to better look at the parts that are different.

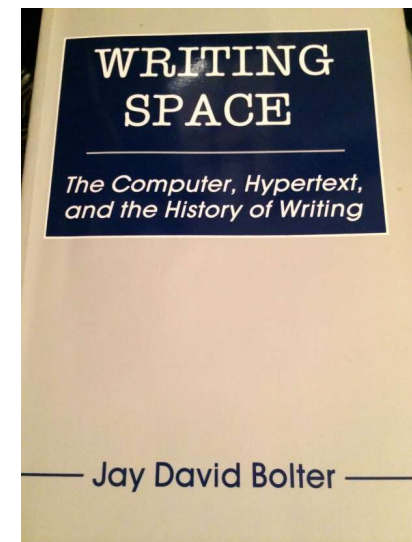


- Ian Bogost



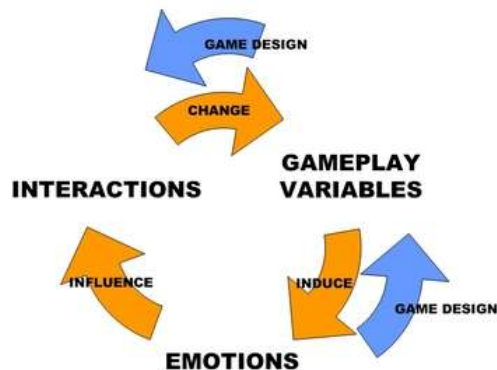
The biggest place where I think formalism can assist with this in games is in examining the rhetorics of games. There has been movement towards a unique rhetorics of games via stuff like Ian Bogost's work.

- Anaphora
- Apopheis
- Paralipsis
- Ethopoeia
- Anacoenosis
- Antinome



That's actually fairly formalist. But if we start to regard the story layer that formalism intentionally blows off as being a performative layer, I suggest that instead, we could leverage quite a lot of traditional rhetorics. If we can describe a system as using anaphora or metonymy, I think we go a long way towards better understanding not only of those systems and those game stories,

GAME INDUCED VARIABLE CHANGE		Major Decrease		Minor Decrease		Minor Increase		Major Increase	
									
		Temporary	Persistent	Temporary	Persistent	Temporary	Persistent	Temporary	Persistent
 Freedom	 Action	End of big action opportunity	Linear path, Difficult to find options (<i>Confusing menus, Quasi-modal controls</i>)	End of action opportunity, Misleading cue, Temporary loss of ability	Avatar death and respawning, Local reset, Simulation conventions (<i>Usable vs. non-interactive objects</i>)	Action opportunity (<i>Timed door opening</i>), Resource gain (if player can choose how to spend it)	New minor persistent ability (<i>Gauge increase</i>)	Big action opportunity (<i>Flying cap in Mario</i>), Large resource gain (if player can choose how to spend it)	New major persistent ability (<i>Orthogonal ability - Harvey Smith</i>)
		End of big advantage opportunity, Misdirecting affordance	Permanent loss of ability, Inappropriate controls, New controller (<i>Guitar Hero, Steel Battalion</i>)	Temporary loss of ability, Randomness	Difficulty increase	Advantage opportunity (<i>Block + Counter combo</i>), New short-term goal (if game is balanced)	Affordance, New ability to trade resource for preparation (<i>Increased life gauge, Buff</i>)	Big advantage opportunity (<i>Exploiting an enemy's weak points</i>), New medium-term goal (if game is balanced)	Kinesthetic isomorphism (<i>Wii Golf</i>), New persistent ability, Insufficient difficulty increase



- Emotion engineering chart excerpt, Stephane Bura

but also towards understanding how systems themselves function in those rhetorical roles in our everyday lives. And the thing is that this lingo exists and can be leveraged. It is just the formalism of another discipline, one which humanities-centric critics are maybe so steeped in that they do not see it as a formalism.

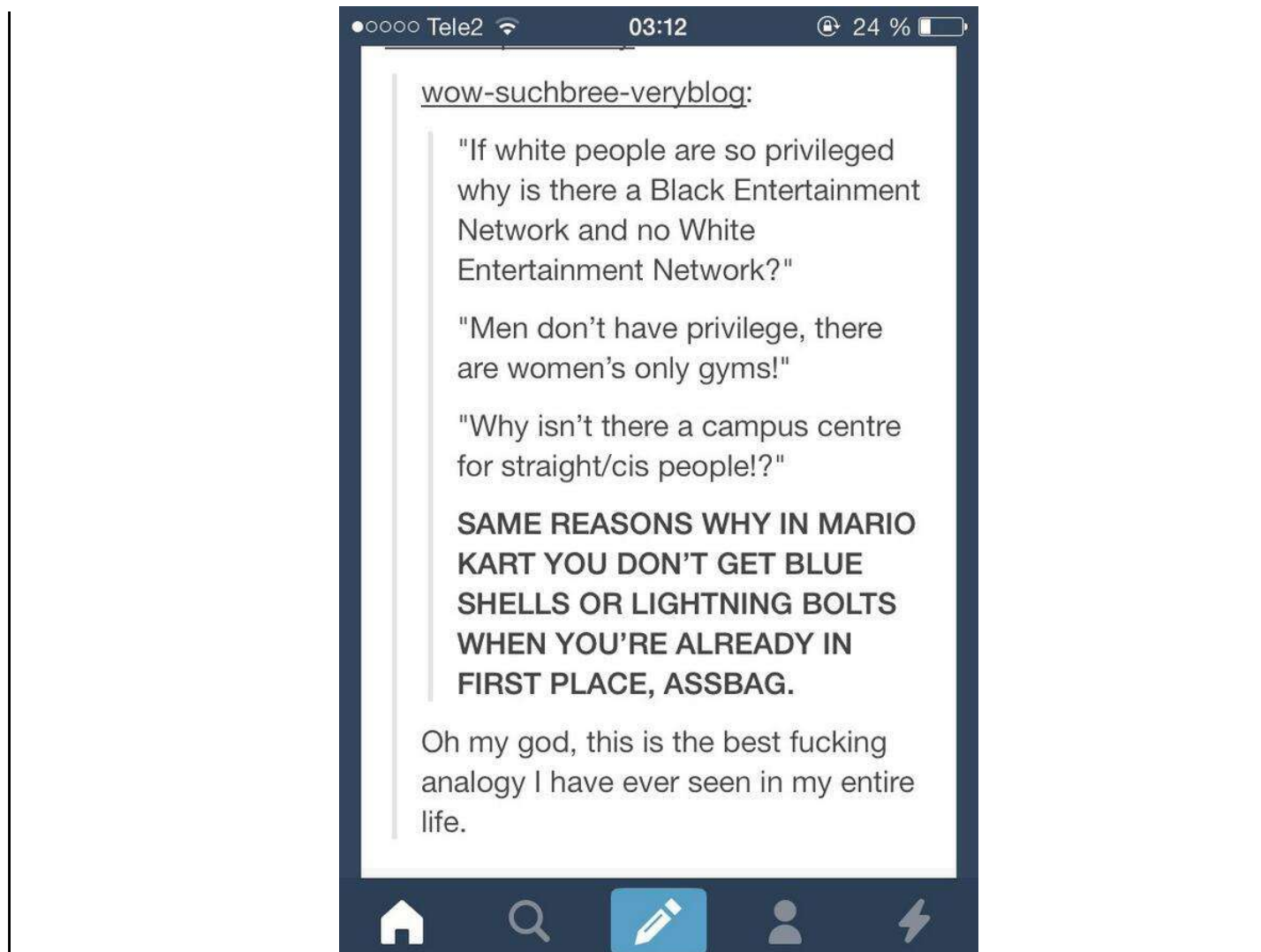


The other big lens that I think formalism has the potential to illuminate is the notion of play. We still say we “play” music.

Lately, games formalism is starting to say that ludic structures are everywhere; that there are chord progressions and a beat you can dance to everywhere in life. That means we can apply the critical language of game studies, such as it is, to elements well outside the label of games.



Elections. Wall Street, lots of vast systems in the world, are interpretable as ludic structures, as games we play with one another, as games we play without consent, as games we are tokens in. And critics could go beyond the shallow and facile & actually offer real critique of those systems in a way that opens up both means of social change and realms for art to explore.



In the end, it takes a formal lens to really discuss the ideas that Twine is also avant-garde literature, and the social issues affecting the 99% have a lot more in common with behavioral structures in World of Warcraft guilds, or the tournament structure in League of Legends. This blue shells critique could not have happened without a deep understanding of formal game elements.

Some ways to analyze

- Games can be analyzed in
 - Chords (Black box and systemic analysis)
 - Melody (learning loop analysis)
 - Rhythm (tuning analysis)
 - Timbre and sound (game feel analysis)
 - Performance (experiential analysis)
 - Experience (reviews)
 - Cultural criticism (game criticism)

The debates about “what is a game” happened between multiple overlapping circles that have very little to do with one another: who sits on awards panels, and what is taught in universities, and whether feedback is narrative, and whether all kinds of people are able to make games in the culture as it now sits... the debate is completely different depending on where you were standing. “Games” is never going to fall into one bucket or critical lens; but we can build bridges and connections between buckets using these analyses, and in the end that is a far more intersectional approach, because it recognizes identity as well as commonalities. We enrich ourselves and our mutual understanding not by claiming pre-eminence of one circle, but by learning to move between them.