

# Formalism as a Philosophy for Designing the Unconventional

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## INTRODUCTION

There has long been a need for clear methods to help designers, particularly novice designers, figure out how to proceed when designing a game (Fullerton 2019; Adams 2013; Björk and Holopainen 2005). Many of these design methods focus on conventions in line with the AAA games industry (e.g., the Hero's journey, game design patterns). After all, "the success of a Game Production program lies in how well it understands and responds to the industry's needs" (Bogost et al. 2005, 60). However, the videogame industry includes a much more pluriform group of artists, some working on shoestring budgets while trying to make unconventional games (Keogh 2023). This risks a mismatch between game design education and game design practice, with current game design handbooks potentially constraining rather than supporting creativity.

In this workshop we address these problems by exploring formalism as a design philosophy (rather than a method) to help designers create unconventional games. Formalism forms an excellent framework for design, since it is specific in its focus on the ways games trigger a defamiliarizing experience, i.e., moments where games break expectations, yet broad enough to account for the design of a wide variety of analogue and digital games. This contrasts with other design models for art games which tend to focus on particular types of games (see Magnuson 2023; Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2021). Mitchell and van Vught (2023) provide a rigorous and clearly defined way of thinking about *how* a game means, starting from concepts adapted from Russian Formalism (Steiner 2014; Erlich 1980) and Neoformalist Film Theory (Thompson 1988). While this approach has been used for game analysis (Mitchell 2014; 2016), here we propose the use of *formalism as a design philosophy* for the design of unconventional analogue and digital games.

The approach roughly consists of three iteratively connected stages. Firstly, to design the unconventional, we must establish the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss and Benzinger 1970), a shared, historically specific set of social, cultural, economic and technical conventions by which players experience games. This involves a sharing of

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repertoire knowledge and identification of the movement of what formalists call the “literary system” of “genres, schools, or historical styles” (Steiner 2014, 88). Secondly, we need an understanding of the different ways games can challenge or break these conventions. Here we take inspiration from Mitchell et al.’s (2020) list of poetic gameplay devices and use the formalist concept of “motivations” to divide the defamiliarizing functioning of devices into compositional, transtextual, realistic, artistic and/or ludic categories (Mitchell and van Vught 2023). Thirdly, we must decide on an intended aesthetic player experience and create a set of defamiliarized devices (and non-defamiliarized materials) to evoke that experience. Here we start from the formalist concept of “the dominant,” “a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others” (Thompson 1988, 89), and reframe it as a design strategy from which aesthetic experience will (hopefully) emerge.

## **Goal**

This workshop will explore how a formalist design philosophy can be a starting point and a process for designing unconventional games. As this approach is still being developed, our intention is literally to *workshop* the approach with participants. A key outcome will be a clearer understanding of how a formalist perspective can be applied to design. We also intend to put together an edited volume focusing on applications of videogame formalism, both for analysis and for design. This workshop will serve as a starting point for the design section of the edited volume, with participants encouraged to expand on ideas they share at the workshop and submit chapter outlines for the proposed book.

## **For whom**

We aim to bring together game designers and game design educators with an interest in exploring alternative methods for teaching and practicing game design. We would ideally like a diverse set of participants from around the world, with varying levels of experience. It would also be helpful if some of the participants work specifically in the areas of art games or games for change. We are interested in participants who work with both digital and analogue games. Participation will be open, but we will ask participants to provide us with a short motivating statement to help us target the workshop to their interests, and to help us to form groups for the design exercise.

## **Format**

The workshop will begin with a sharing of the formalist approach to game analysis, and our initial thoughts and explorations as to how to make use of this approach for game design, particularly the design of unconventional games. We will also share our own experiences using similar approaches in teaching. This will be followed by a design exercise, where participants will work in small groups to use the formalist approach to quickly design a paper prototype for an unconventional game. Groups will then regroup to discuss their experiences, to develop a case-based understanding of the various ways formalism can or cannot work as a design philosophy, and other possible approaches for designing unconventional games.

The workshop will be delivered in a hybrid format, with one organizer focusing on the face-to-face session, and one focusing on the online session, while maintaining interaction between the two sessions. The idea is to enable as broad a range of participants as possible. The workshop is intended to be 3 hours in length.

## Proposers' bios

Alex Mitchell is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore. His research investigates defamiliarization in gameplay, motivations for replaying story-focused games, authoring tools, and collaborative storytelling. He is a founding member of the executive board of the Association for Research in Digital Interactive Narratives (ARDIN).

Jasper van Vught is assistant professor in the department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University (Netherlands). His research includes methodological challenges to studying games as texts and pedagogical challenges to teaching about them. He is a core member of the Utrecht Centre for Game Research.

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