

Transformative Power of Gameplay: Negotiating Textures of Play

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While ‘gameplay’ is a much-used term in the context of game research, it still does not seem to be fully developed as a theoretical concept. Most definitions are fairly simple, focusing mostly on the way in which the player’s actions inside the game environment are actively influenced by elements such as the game system and its rules (Salen and Zimmerman 2004), game dynamics (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008), the cognitive and emotional nature of players’ actions (Lindley et al., 2008), and the challenges the player is exposed to (Adams & Rollings 2006). An interesting analysis of this complex phenomenon were presented by Dominic Arsenaut and Bernard Perron (2009). In their work, gameplay is a heuristic circle that “is always a continuous loop between the gamer’s input and the game’s output” (113). Another thought-provoking research is from Olli Tapio Leino (2012a), for whom gameplay creates an ontological hybrid that intertwines the player and the game object. However, both of these approaches restrict themselves to considering a one-on-one relation between the video game and the player, without taking into consideration other external factors that construct gameplay. In order to address this limitation in the existing research, the main aim of this presentation is to use the Lefebvrian idea of texture to develop a view of gameplay as a spatiotemporal performative experience, becoming a space of communication between various actants, including those that are external to the game environment.

The idea of texture in the context of spatial experiences was first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in *Production of Space* (2009[1974]). It has been further developed in the field of humanist geography (Adams et al. 2001) and media studies (Jansson 2007) as a notion that helps us understand how material space, spatial practices, and social discourses are intertwined and interact with each other in communicational processes. André Jansson describes it as the “communicative fabric of space” (2007, 194) and points out that it allows us to see the “ongoing process of communication producing and becoming space, and space producing and becoming communication” (2007, 195). It is both the feel of space and the medium through which space is mediated and changed by its users and the discourse. However, texture also allows space to have an active role in this connection. Space is neither a text that one has to read, nor a fixed geographical area. It is a constantly shifting phenomenon, that is changed by, and creates change in, the actants it gathers. Moreover, studying textures not only gives us the opportunity to study practices and space together – as being mutually defined and practically inextricable – but also to uncover negotiations and ideologies hidden amongst the dominant paths and patterns.

The idea of gameplay as texture emphasises not only the processual nature of this phenomenon, as aforementioned definitions have, but also two sides of the video game experience: material and performative. The first one is connected both to physical side of the game experience, like the hardware, the playing environment and the body of the player (Apperley and Jayemanne 2012), as well as to its digital aspect, that takes into account the software behaviour of the game as a playable artefact (Leino 2012b). Second, to the performativity of the play experience (Jayemanne 2017). Analysing gameplay as texture allows us to see that the game object is not only a container for the player's activities, but also a co-creator of spatial meanings. Gameplay as texture is thereby woven between the player and the game object itself, shaping their ontic boundaries and transforming them both.

Another interesting feature of the Lefebvrian texture is the fact that it is always comprised of numerous individual overlapping paths and patterns. Together, they can create different, sometimes even mutually exclusive, textures. In the context of gameplay, it also means that, while we can point out the dominant way of playing (Aarseth 2007), it is not the only one possible.

In most cases, dominant textures in games are collectively created through, for example, processes of genre evolution. When picking up a new FPS game, we know how we are expected to play it – in other words, we know the textures we are expected to weave through our engagement with the game object. However, alternative textures can be produced in relation to the same game through the adoption of different practices of play (like speedrunning, glitching, or achievement hoarding), watching Twitch or YouTube videos or game modifications (mods). What is common to all of these is the communal aspect of play: even if the player is engaging with a game on her own, she is always in contact with the traces of other players, no matter if she is using a specific strategy of play or just a walkthrough when she is stuck. Despite the fact that a single occurrence can influence and change a game (for example, the release of a new patch), only by studying repetitive practices can we reveal and analyse all the regularities and dominant tendencies in the context of negotiation and ideological structures.

These very specific, alternate ways of playing (Meades 2015, Linderoth, J. et al. 2015) will be the main focus of this presentation. I will explore various transgressive textures in games, with a focus on speedruns, in order to demonstrate the negotiation patterns, such as the distinctive characteristics of a specific genre, subversive behaviour inside the game environment or transgressive motivations for an alternate exploration. By studying recordings of specific speedruns (noting the manoeuvres employed, the usage of a specific hardware and their overall aesthetics) and the discourse around them, I will be able to show how these processes are shaped both by the materiality of the digital object of the video game, each player's individual play and abilities, as well as the external activities and discussions (for example watching other players' practices) in which they are contextualized. This analysis will lead to a redefinition of the concept of gameplay as something that is experienced as individual phenomenon, but created collectively.

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