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Transformative Power of Gameplay: Negotiating Textures of Play

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Gameplay and its definitions

'Gameplay' is one of those terms that is broadly used in the discourses surrounding gaming, but that, for academic purposes, is still underresearched and quite vague. In very simple words, it can be described as a way in which a game in being played. This is of course a very general statement, but it turns our attention to the most important elements of this phenomenon: game, play and player (Leino 2012a: 57). This triad – often extended with other elements specific to the particular perspective – can be found in every definition of the phenomenon. For example, in *Rules of Play* Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004: 303) focus mostly on the rules of the game, which bind the player. Jesper Juul emphasises the fact that gameplay is not a mirror of the rules of the game, but a consequence of these rules and the player's disposition (2005: 303). Other definitions, like Richard Rouse III's (2005), focus more on the interactive aspect of the phenomenon, which he understands as the reaction of the game environment to the player's actions and choices. Similar points are made by Kristine Jørgensen (2008), who emphasises the dynamic nature of the relation between the game artefact and the player "that comes into being when the player interacts with these[game] rules" (ibid.). Sometimes, gameplay is defined from a specific methodology, for example psychology, which results in addition of such elements as the player's emotions (Lindley at al. 2008).

In the sea of different definition of the vague concept of gameplay, two particularly interesting propositions propose completely new approaches to the phenomenon. The first was initially proposed by Bernard Perron (2006) and later developed further with Dominic Arsenault (Arsenault & Perron, 2008). From this perspective, gameplay relates to the action of play and not to the game artefact. Gameplay is here understood as a heuristic cycle: "playing a video game is always a continuous loop between the gamer's input and the game's output" (ibid.: 113). Gameplay is here not only connected to the way the game works and looks, or to what story it conveys, but, primarily, to the constant processes of interpretation that the player needs to engage in if they want to play at all. Those processes start either from the level of the game environment (when we look into specific events, objects, actions etc. that happen during play) or on the macro level, when, for example, player recognise the genre and its structures, which influence their decisions. This system is based on three spirals that contain each other: the gameplay spiral, the narrative spiral and the heuristic spiral. They are present in every game that is being played, but the extent of their visibility depends on the characteristics of the game itself and the player's predisposition. Interestingly, the process of interpretation can start outside the game when the player is exposed to promotional materials that already influence their expectations (Vella, Gualeni & Arjoranta, 2019). For Arsenault and Perron (2008) playing a game is above all an act of communication between the game system and the player: the game

algorithm converts the information contained in the code into interpretable objects for the player; then, the player takes actions based on their interpretations, which are again, in turn, interpreted by the game. This process repeats itself with each turn of the cycle.

In Arsenault and Perron's model, while the game artefact is still an integral part of this communication process, its only function is to be the platform that receives (and resends) signals for the player to interpret. In this heuristic cycle, the game is, in a sense, an interpreter for the player's actions, but it does not co-create any meanings – meanings are something that only belongs to the realm of human players. The boundaries of the involved actants are stable, and do not really change in an ontological sense.

It is quite the opposite situation in the writings of Olli Tapio Leino (2012a), who emphasises the hydrid nature of the gameplay phenomenon. He points out two important things about this issue: the construction of the English word 'gameplay', as a combination of the words game and play, and the fact that the game, as a technological artefact, can be perceived as an Other from the point of view of the playing subject.

The etymology of the word 'gameplay', according to Leino, highlights the connection between materiality and process during play, which also links to his conception of the video game object as a playable artefact (Leino 2012b). Materiality and process are inseparably intertwined, which is what makes the process of play possible in the first place. Gameplay as a material process, and the experience of it, are co-created by the player and the game, both of which thereby come to be understood as entities that exist as performed materiality, bonded together. The game is no longer only understood as imposing the gameplay condition upon the player (thanks to the fact that, on the one hand, the player's actions are made possible and meaningful, and, on the other hand, the player can enforce their freedom, while feeling responsible for their actions) (Leino 2012b); but also connect with the player on the ontological level. During the gameplay, the player and the video game create a new, hybrid type of ontological subject. The example that Leino uses is the mechanism of flashbang grenades in first-person shooter game *Far Cry* (Crytek 2004). When it goes off in the player's proximity during play, the view of what is happening on the screen becomes distorted and player usually says: "I am blind". However, they can still clearly see the screen itself, their hands, the controller etc. It is not the player, as a human individual independent of the game, that has been blinded – rather, it is the entity that has been brought into being through the engagement between the player and the game. This is the moment in which we can see the "hybrid intentionality" (Leino 2012a: 73) that is modelled by both human and non-human actant: "the 'hybridity' of gameplay does not refer to a mere simultaneous occurrence of material, processual, and experiential qualities, but to an inextricable intertwinement of qualities across ontological domains" (ibid.).

Both of the aforementioned approaches emphasise interesting points about the gameplay phenomenon. Arsenault and Perron's heuristic understanding of gameplay emphasises the interpretative process that is based on the constant communication loop between game and player (Arsenault & Perron 2009). Leino, on the other hand, focuses on the ontology of the subject involved in gameplay (Leino 2012a). In this paper, inspired by these two lines of thoughts, I would like to connect communicative aspects with ontological issues, and present a third perspective that is more performative, transformative and spatial in its character.

As I presented in my other papers (Janik 2017; Janik 2018), I perceived the connection between the player and the game through the lens of Tadeusz Kantor's idea of the bio-object. As applied

to an understanding of gameplay, the bio-object refers to what is brought into being through the special bond that connects, shapes and transforms both the player and the video game object. They are both equal in this new unity and, as equals, they are both the main conduit of the play's meaning. However, even if they appear as one, the ontological status of the bio-object is more nuanced. In the context of digital play, the bio-object is neither the game, nor the player. It manifests though the actions of both, and (re)shapes them on the level of their different materiality (respectively both digital and physical) through performative, meaning-generative processes. In order for this to happen, human and non-human actants need to remain linked but distinct. As distinct entities playing together, they need to communicate with each other. The video game gains a double status here: as an active collaborator, and as the space where the conversation between different, human and non-human actants happens. In this perspective (also taking into consideration Arsenault & Perron's and Leino's lines of thoughts), gameplay can be perceived as a spatial phenomenon that both conveys the conversation and transforms all actants involved in the bio-object bond. Therefore, I would like to analyse gameplay from the perspective of space studies to interpret it as a spatiotemporal and transformative experience, which changes and influences the entities that are connected through it. To do so, I will introduce into my deliberations the concept of 'texture,' as it is developed in the work of Henri Lefebvre.

Spatial textures

The idea of texture in the context of spatial experiences was first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (2009[1974]). It has been further developed in the fields 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. It is quite an abstract idea, which is not very well-described in Lefebvre's writing. It is connected with his concept of the spatial triad (Lefebvre 2009), as a phenomenon which produces the affordances for a subject to make a changes in a given space. Whereas the spatial triad theory has been used in game studies (Aarseth 2007; 2008; Günzel 2008; Crawford 2015), as has Lefebvre's concept of, *rhythmanalysis* (Bonner (2018; Harrington 2018; Keogh 2018), the notion of texture has, to date, not been introduced in game studies.

While a holistic Lefebvrian analysis of digital games would be a potentially fruitful exploration, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I would like to focus specifically on the notion of texture as a means of conceptualising and describing the phenomenon of gameplay. Given that, as I have already pointed out, the idea of 'texture' remains rather vague in Lefebvre's text, I would like to draw on André Jansson's (2007; 2013) new media interpretation of the concept.

Jansson uses the notion of texture to analyse the mediatisation process, which tend to bond together, in a dependent way, various social processes and technological mediations (Jansson 2013: 281). He describes texture 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). As such, 'texture' is both the feel of space and the medium through which space is mediated and changed by its users and the discourse. However, this concept of 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 network that is changed by, and creates change in, the actants it gathers (Lefebvre 2009: 222). 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. Even if a given space is designed according to the specific needs of a dominant majority, this does not mean it does not hold the possibility of being used in sometimes transgressive or subversive ways by other groups, giving rise to new textures – and, hence, new usages of space – within the same locus. For example, urban space is designed for human pedestrians, but can often visited and made use of by wild animals.

Moreover, texture can produce space because of its collective character: the activity of one actant is not enough to form a texture, but when many users act in a given space, they can produce textures together (Lefebvre 2009: 132). One can easily see this process in urban areas, where pedestrians learning how to navigate a new space end up not really using designed paths, but more desire paths. Later, this negotiation of paths can result in an official redesign of the pavement, either in a way that aligns with the unofficial paths, or in a complete blockage of unofficial paths – for example, by a wall. So, while textures are collective in their nature, a single event can change them (in the case of this example, this would be the wall) (Jansson 2007: 197).

Gameplay textures

The notion of texture can also be used in the context of video game space. This seems straightforward in multiplayer games, in which the game environment is negotiated as a social practice by many human and non-human actants. The situation, though, is less obvious when it comes to single-player games. The question, then, is: if textures can be created in singleplayer games as they are not performed collectively? To answer this question, we should start with focus on the characteristics of video game space.

On the one hand, playing a game is a spatial experience. The game environment is constructed of elements that are situated in a space, which, despite its differences from the material space of everyday life, is built upon the same logic of exploration. The game environment is designed for the player's actions, even if these might often be hard to predict (Bonner 2015: 142). It is also often organized according to familiar architectural conventions, which also helps players to navigate through space and create the sense that we are exploring something familiar (ibid.). Moreover, the digital environment of a game, like urban space, is a space filled with encounters with other players (in case of multiplayer games), objects or characters (Janik 2015). In the moment of play, different bodies, both human and non-human, meet with, and influence, each other. Digital game space is, therefore, like Lefebvre wrote about physical space, first of all a process that is continuously being performed in time and space.

In order to operate in this dynamic process and, more importantly, to achieve the goals imposed on us by the game object, the player must be able to skilfully recognize and enact patterns of behaviour. Only in this way can they effectively navigate the game environment. These behavioural patterns, the paths they have to follow and the tasks they have to perform, produce

the gaming experience[1]. Altogether, these create a specific spatial structure that is built upon the communication between different actants inside the bio-object – as such, these patterns of behaviour can be interpreted as digital textures. However, if we take under consideration the ludic nature of the game object, these patterns can also be called gameplay.

This is also the moment in which the dual role of the video game is most visible: its space becomes here a platform for communication with the player and, at the same time, the player's interlocutor in this process of communication – the Other that the player tries to understand and have a "conversation" with. In this context, gameplay becomes a communication tool, a kind of multimodal language (Majkowski 2019), which connects the player and the game through the exploration of the game environment. At this point, the similarities between gameplay and Lefebvrian textures are most visible. Although both phenomena come from completely different realms, what unites them is their spatial-performative character and the negotiation of actions within established discourses.

The idea of gameplay texture, then, brings together the spatial materiality of the game and the player's actions, while allowing for communication between different actants. A good example of what can be communicated through the gameplay texture is the phenomenon of genre. Genre textures not only situate the player within a certain space and its properties, but also within a certain logic of rules. They allow us to understand how a game works and how it can be won. If we play an FPS game, there are certain features we can always expect – such as a first-person perspective and the prominence of some form of shooting mechanic. However, other mechanics known from different types of games can be introduced to an FPS production – for example, quietly eliminating our enemies that we can find also in stealth games. A good example is the multiplayer squad-based FPS *Team Fortress 2* (Valve Corporation 2007), where the player can choose from nine playable characters, each of which lets the player experience the game through a completely different kind of gameplay texture: from soldier to spy. We know how to play those characters and which one is more comfortable for us to use, because we played similar games before and learned the basic rules from them. The same goes to a singleplayer game, which can offer the players different types of weapons for a different style of play.

In a case like this, though,, where do we locate the collective aspect of the texture? Genre is a phenomenon that has no strictly defined framework, and is constantly being negotiated: from the production and distribution process, to critical and player reception (Garda 2016; Arsenault, 2009). We can also add to this model the game object and other non-human actants who also influence what form the genre takes at the given moment – for example a technology that is popular at the given moment in time. During the historical development of these negotiations, some mechanical and ludic solutions gain or lose popularity – others remain the same, timeless. The popularity of *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) and its mechanic allowing you to perform a jump by pressing a button influenced the development of the jumping mechanic as one of the primary means of traversing the spaces of *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985). As these games' position as discursively-established 'classics' became established over the decades, both Nintendo productions went on to inspire games as *Super Meat Boy* (McMillen & Refenes 2010) and *Braid* (Number None 2008). Both games significantly diversify the mechanics of jumping on platforms, foregrounding spatial puzzle elements (especially in the case of *Braid*), but the

[1] Alongside the audiovisual and narrative aspects, which are also an integral part of the gaming environment.

construction in which we travel through worlds-levels to free the princess stay the same. Of course, in terms of storylines, the stories differ from those the *Mario* franchise, tending to be more postmodern, but the creators continue to mention Nintendo as their inspiration (Boluk & LeMieux 2017). In this and similar ways, texture and gameplay are the result of the collective effort of many actors – although we play these games alone, on our own equipment, their gameplay textures are negotiated in a bigger context.

Needless to say, our own individual playing of a game participates in these negotiations. . Playing a new game comes as something natural after gaining experience in many games with similar characteristics. In short, our knowledge of a particular genre constitutes familiarity with its dominant gameplay textures, which shape our expectations of how we will be engaging with the space of a game belonging to the genre. Of course, it should be remembered that practice verifies all models; hence, the gameplay texture is not stable, but constantly changing and evolving. Nevertheless, the genre creates dominant textures, which might shape our expectations so strongly that we might not even consider possibilities that do not fit it. When, in a two-dimensional platformer, we see our player-character standing on the left side of the screen, we immediately assume that we should move to the right; most likely, we do not even consider the possibility of heading left. Such thinking was used, for example, by the creators of *Limbo* (Playdead 2010) in the form of an achievement that the player can get during the first seconds of the game. All the player has to do is to go left and find a bright ball. Highlighting the way in which this diverges from the expected spatial behaviour, the achievement is even called "Wrong Way."

What this achievement emphasises is the variety of gameplay textures that can be supported in relation to one video game object, that allows player to experience the different layers of the game. Texture not only explain to us how to move around in space, but also produces meanings that emerge from relationships between actants. The way space is built in *Limbo* and other two-dimensional platformers forces the player to move right, forwards: a lone figure standing on the left side of the screen, facing a whole world full of objects to collect, platforms to jump, puzzles to solve and opponents to defeat. This simple structure can produce quite different game strategies, mapping different meanings onto the game space.

Another thing that can be observed here is the transformative power of the gameplay texture, thanks to which the ways in which games are experienced, created and made are constantly changing. This is why I would like to take a closer look at the texture phenomenon and its logic, and explore non-dominant textures in digital games. Therefore, I would like to focus here on gameplay textures created by a community of players, whose subversive way of playing often defies the implied genre texture, leading to the creation of new and unique ways of exploration. An example of such a phenomenon of alternative play or counterplay (Meades 2015) is the convention of the speedrun. Here, I will be most interested in the involvement of the actors in the development of new interpretations of familiar game spaces. I will also focus on an analysis of the communication processes that occur between the game object in all its complexity and the player, going beyond the digital environment itself to observe how textures and gameplay are shaped in the wider context of the community.

Speedrun

One of the most important features of a spatial texture, next to its dynamic and spatio-temporal character, is its collective character. As mentioned above, a texture is not created through a

single path or by a single user of a space. It consists of many intersecting paths and just as many encounters between different actants in entangled spaces. This multiplicity also makes it possible for more than one texture to appear in a given space. The same is true for gameplay textures. As discussed earlier, the dominant texture that defines a particular game genre is not the only texture that can be realized in the game space. Instructional videos – such as walkthroughs or Let's Plays – or explanatory posts on gaming portals, might suggest alternative textures. Within the space and mechanics designed by the creators, players can create their own paths in order to pursue their own goals.

By sharing experiences and using fan-created content, players collectively create new types of gameplay texture that overlap with existing ones. Interestingly, all this happens in two spaces. In a single-player game, on the one hand, we have a game space which is usually experienced individually; on the other hand, we have the communicational space of players, which is usually the Internet. Textures therefore combine what is private experience with what is experienced and discussed collectively. What, then, is the process of creating textures in a video game object based on? What exactly are the mechanisms of texture production and gameplay?

Rainforest Scully-Blaker defines a speedrun as "the practice of players or 'runners' attempting to 'travel' from a game's opening state at its first necessary button input to the game's conclusion at its last necessary button input in the smallest amount of time possible" (Scully-Blaker 2014). When we look closer into the phenomenon, we can see that, although a speedrunner might work against the intentions of the game's creators, they are still within the limits of the game object and its digital materiality. Speedrunners do not necessarily pay attention to the routes marked out by designers, but rather choose less obvious paths which allow them to significantly shorten the time of playing. One can say that they use a specific, self-created route through the predesigned map (ibid.).

However, this phenomenon is too complex to analyse only from the perspective of its constituting an alternative form of play. Existing academic work on speedruns – though it is relatively scarce – bears this out. Scully-Blaker (2014) considers speedruns from the perspective of Michel de Certau, and focuses on their narrative possibilities. Though Fraser McKissack and Lawrence May (2018) are also interested in the narrative side of the speedrun, they approach it from a different angle, focusing more on its temporal and spatial aspects. By using Deleuzian terms such as time-image and movement-image, they make a distinction between speedruns and the 'standard' way of playing, which is more coherent and nurtures the player's relationship with the playable character. Focusing on the example of *Left 4 Dead* series (2008-2009), they show how speedrunners, for whom the main goal is a particular time result, ignore the established routes, instead exploring the game space in ways which might seem irrational to a bystander. In this kind of space, that is no life and the preprogrammed events are not triggered. The main thing that speedrunners experience is time and its passing (McKissack and May 2018: 8). However, even if the „out-of-bounds" exists outside the 'main', playable space, it is not detached from being an actual, digital space. The ways in which speedrunners traverse a digital environment might appear incoherent for a person who is watching a speedrun for the first time, but it is still leads to the creation of understandable paths, and to the formation of recognisable textures. This is possible because this "out-of-bounds" space still exists within the materiality of the video game object. It is part of the digital environment of the game, although it lies on the periphery. It might not be a part of the official map, but it is still involved creating a spatial experience (Scully-Blaker 2014) – speedrunners just conceptualize it during

their explorations. Hence, I interpret speedrunning as a spatio-temporal phenomenon in which space begins to be calculated with time, and the passage of time through space. More importantly, when understood through this frame, speedrunning becomes one of the patterns that a performative process of communication with the game object can take – and, as a result, a particular gameplay-texture.

Negotiating rules

The gameplay-textures inside the video game object are negotiated through the activity of the users of the game space, including both human and non-human actants. The player is part of a complex process, in which the materiality of the digital object and its processes are intertwined with each other (Leino 2012b). Despite the central position that the player is placed in by the game's designers, the player is still constrained by the software behaviour (as Leino (ibid.) calls it), as well as the sets of expectations they should fulfil if they want to be successful. Felan Parker (2008) calls these expectations the implied rules: the rules that are prepared by designers, but easy to modify or exchange. He contrasts implied rules with player-imposed rules, giving the example of so-called jeep tag, which is a game of tag that is played inside the environment of the online multiplayer game *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie 2001). When playing jeep tag, players do not behave in the manner that is expected of them to meet the game's stated objectives – instead, they chase each other with the all-terrain vehicles the game provides them with. These types of rules can be negotiated and easily manipulated, contrary to fixed rules (Parker 2008) or software behaviour embedded in digital game materiality (as Leino puts it). So, for example, we can give in to the life of a lumberjack in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and spend hours just working in a sawmill, trying to make as much wood as possible (player-imposed rules), but, if we choose to do this, we will not, at the same time, be able to finish the main narrative line, since we would have abandoned the path of the epic hero (implied rules). However, whether we are a lumberjack or a Dragonborn hero, we are still inside the video game object and in both cases we are restrained by the game environment and its properties – we cannot, for example, climb trees, or ride other human characters.

Similar lists of rules and challenges are created by the speedrun community. Two of the most popular types of challenges – applicable in almost every game that is suitable for speedrunning – are "Any%" and "100%." The "Any%" category of speedruns assumes that the game should be completed as soon as possible, regardless of the percentage of completion. In the "100% type, as the name suggests, one is not only required to finish the game as fast as possible, but also to fully complete all the designed challenges with a perfect score. In addition to these basic categories, other types of speedruns exist that reflect the unique features of particular games – for example, the ability to collect items that allow us to progress to higher levels, or items that give us new powers. Another popular category of speedruns, for example, is Low%, which describes the situation in which one should not only be fast, but also collect as few objects as possible. Some other player-based rules provide more specific guidelines, for example about the usage of glitches or completing specific levels or quests (especially when we are talking about games with an open world or with no clear ending). The list of rules also includes a list of tricks and special actions to help you achieve your goal.

Being able to execute all the rules and understand how the game environment functions requires a lot of dedication. Speedrunners do not question the rules of the game object itself.

On the contrary, their knowledge about the materiality of the game and how it functions exceeds the knowledge of the average player. This is similar to what Meades (2015) emphasises in his research: tinkering with the game object – no matter if we are talking about modifying the software or hardware or searching for hidden glitches – is considered by involved players as a sign of great dedication and adoration of the video game object itself.

However, this kind of in-depth knowledge of the digital object, including its digital space, is not created only in the privacy of a single player's room. Games are complex technological artifacts, and a process of communication between different users needs to happen in order to understand it. Players need to communicate with each other to exchange their experiences in order for a shared knowledge base to be built. If we add to this process the voice of the designers, which is also imprinted in the game environment, as well as the game object and its properties and the accompanying technology, we can finally realize how complex the network of connections is that weaves the gameplay texture. In order to illustrate this process, I will use the example of a speedrun of one of the most recognizable Nintendo games – *Super Mario Bros*.

Super Mario Bros. – a short case study

Speedrunning *Super Mario Bros* requires players not only to perfect their hand-eye coordination and achieve mastery of the basic gameplay, but also to understand how the game's spatiotemporal organization on the level of pixels and frames. Not only do they often need to specifically measure their jumps to hit the right pixel to set the game level in a specific layout (for example, to make Mario's enemies appear in a certain point in time and space, or to reset the destination of the portals that can be found in the pipes), but they also have to take into account how many frames they have gained or lost in order not to run special animations at the end of the levels, which might cost them a few extra fractions of a second.

The current world record for speedrunning *Super Mario Bros.* at the time of writing was set by tavenwebb2002 in August 2019, and stands at 4m 55s 746ms. In order to achieve this record, the player would have had to dedicate a lot of time to practice and gather knowledge about the game. Understanding the game object in a such sophisticated way is only possible if one follows already-developed gameplay textures. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, spatial textures are created in a collective way. In the case of digital games, they develop on two levels. On the one hand, they are created in the moment of play, inside the player-game relationship. This moment of meeting and joining together in a bio-object (Janik 2018) is also the moment when the two actants start to perform and negotiate their properties and boundaries. This constant process of negotiation allows them to build new textures, and thus to communicate in general. Gameplay textures, then, are created in the heuristic communication loop described by Arsenault and Perron (2009), with the difference that it is not only the player but also the game that is an active actant in the co-creation of meanings. This is especially easy to spot in the frequent situations in which glitches are a vital part of the tricks and techniques of speedrunning.

A glitch pushes the boundaries of the game object, which brightens up in its autonomy (Janik 2017). The phenomenon is particularly foregrounded in speedrunning, since exploiting glitches is often a crucial tactic for speedrunners. A prominent example in *Super Mario Bros.* is the "Bullet Bill Glitch". In order to trigger this glitch, at the end of a level, the player must make Mario collide with a Bullet Bill that was fired from a nearby cannon at the exact moment when

they both touch the flag's pedestal. When this happens, the flag does not go down the end-of-level flagpole, and the animation of Mario entering the castle is not triggered which automatically speeds up the level completion (darbian for: Snyder 2017: 215). The player not only has to show great agility and timing when performing this glitch, but must also be aware of the fact that they need to wait a specific amount of time on the level start screen, to be sure that their arrival at the end of the level is synchronized with Bullet Bill's trajectory.

Such control over the game object's digital materiality does not mean, however, that we have successfully tamed the game object and can predict its behaviour. An element of uncertainty and unknowability remains at the core of the game object. The player has to also remember about the so-called RNG (Random Number Generator), which is a mechanism hidden in games that determines the randomness of the events, objects and actions that player can experience during a playthrough. There are games in which this is the basic mechanism, such as *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen 2011)*;* in case of *Super Mario Bros*. Darbian, one of the leading *Super Mario Bros.* speedrunners, mentions in an interview that you are never certain how Bowser will behave in the final fight, and, as a result, whether you will be able to beat him quickly (darbian for: Snyder 2017: 215).

In addition to an excellent knowledge of the properties of the game object and an awareness of its digital materiality, the player must also take into account the presence of hardware in their communication with the game environment. A general rule in speedrunning communities is that speedrunners that are attempting the world record, especially when it comes to older games, can only play on the specific hardware that was approved by the community. In the case of *Super Mario Bros.*, the most preferable hardware would be the Nintendo Famicon console, also known in Western countries as the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System), as it was the console that the game was originally released. Using old equipment might cause a number of difficulties – from issues with physical wear on controllers, to compatibility problems with other equipment (for example, the lack of appropriate display adapters). Visual documentation is also important for speedrunners and the validity of their world records. In their recordings, they often show their equipment, recordings of which buttons are pressed on the controller, or even their heart rate, emphasizing not only the materiality of the hardware but also the presence of the player's body and its involvement in this communication loop.

Having observed all of this, it is obvious that a single player cannot obtain all of this knowledge about the game object's secrets by themselves. There is a need for collective cooperation. The speedrun phenomenon is based primarily on the cooperation of many users who publicly share new tricks and discoveries. The collective aspect is mentioned by EssentiaFour, a speedrunner of the *Final Fantasy* (1987-2016) series, in an interview with David Snyder (2017). In the early 2000s, speedrunners from Western countries gathered mainly on the Speed Demos Archives [2](SDA) website, where they exchanged observations and tricks, as well as approved their record-breaking runs. Nowadays, due to technological development and the growing popularity of online streaming, most speedrunners can be found on Twitch TV or YouTube. It is interesting to note that the change of format has also resulted in a change in the speedruns themselves. The presence of an audience makes speedrunners engage in more dynamic runs that are fun to watch. No-one will watch a run that takes months to complete. In addition to streams, many games has its own communication channels dedicated only for speedruns, the

[2] More information can be found here: http://speeddemosarchive.com/.

most popular of which are speedrun.com and dedicated Discord channels (Snyder 2017: 122-125). They are the communication platforms that all speedrunners – the well-known one and the beginners – can find the useful information. This collective aspect of the gameplay texture, can also be witnessed while watching speedrun streams. Most recording apps have a space for the community chat that shows fans' messages of support for the speedrunner in real-time. In these app, speedrunners can also mark checkpoints that they need to reach in a given game and compare them with the previous record time. These points are common for every speedrunner, and one could say that they create a specific, communal spatiotemporal map, or a route, as Scully-Blaker (2014) puts it, that is common to all speedrunners. In the case of *Super Mario Bros.*, these checkpoints are structured around the list of worlds Mario has to visit before he finally defeats Bowser and saves Princess Peach - all of which the current record-holding speedrunners achieve in less than 5 minutes.

We have already noted that it is not only human actants that help to create this collective gameplay texture. Besides the game object, its native hardware and the technology supporting the transmission and communication of speedruns, another category of non-human actant engaged in the active co-creation of the gameplay texture of speedruns are the game emulation software used in the so-called TAS, or Tool Assisted Speedrun. A TAS is a kind of speedrun which is based on precisely-entered preprogramed commands and not on playing the game in real time. The actant playing here is the TAS software itself. The human player/operator only directly uses the tools available in the emulator software, thanks to which they can slow down the game, save its states and re-play fragments back and forth, thereby creating the most optimal course of the game for the computer to play. Often, routes and tricks created in this way are unattainable for the human player, because they require too much precision (Lafond 2017: 2). This is the reason why TASs are considered a separate competition in the speedrunning community. It should be noted, however, that TASs can also help traditional speedrunners. In his article, Scully Blaker quotes a statement from Gardkis, who, after breaking the world record time on *Super Mario Bros.* in 2011, announced that it would not be humanly possible to beat it. It was thanks to TASs that, since then, players discovered new techniques and glitches that allow them to save a few extra frames, as was the case with the "flagpole glitch" – which is the glitch where player has to collide with the flagpole pedestal in order to not to trigger the animation of lowering the flag (Gach 2016).

Conclusions

In this paper, I have focused on explaining the gameplay phenomenon as a spatiotemporal experience that is also rooted deeply inside the process of communication between different actants. By using the Lefebrian notion of texture, I have shown that gameplay is not something that is fixed and unchangeable, but rather a performative phenomenon. The gameplay texture is not limited to the pre-designed action of the implied player (Aarseth 2007) or to activities inside the game object. It is a moment of dialogue between different actants, which takes the form of a spatial communication loop, in which it is very difficult to indicate both the beginning and the end. In their text, Arsenault and Perron (2009) mention that the heuristic gameplay loop begins when the game is launched. Nevertheless, the gameplay-textures, especially the dominant ones (such as genre), start earlier, when the creator decides what their game would be like. The creators are also influenced by various other trends, discussions and digital artefacts – after all, the vast majority of video game designers have been (and still are) players themselves. In all of this, we must not forget about the gameplay condition, which Leino

(2012b) spoke about. The game object itself, as well as the technology associated with it, also impose their presence on the player, forcing certain behaviours on them. Therefore, according to what Lefebvre and Jansson wrote about textures, we can say that in the case of digital game play we are dealing with a "continuous process of communication, which produces space and becomes space, and space which produces and becomes communication" (Jansson 2007: 195). It takes place both inside the relationship between the player and the game (or, as I call it – the bio-object (Janik 2018)), when they negotiate each other's boundaries, as well as outside this intimate connection – on gaming platforms, in comment sections, in game design studios, etc. (Jansson 2007, p. 195).

This approach to the gameplay phenomenon also opens it up to a more posthuman interpretation, especially through the lens of the works and theory of Karen Barad. The gameplay texture is a good example of her approach to the idea of matter, especially to the process of "mattering of the matter": "Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't" (Barad 2015: 175). How the game space and our actions look like depends on many factors and although everything seems to be fixed and given, it is not. As the example of speedrunning shows, the basis of all beings is their process-like becoming and the performative character of the relationships in which they are intertwined. Just as gameplay texture changes, so do each of the involved actants. It is precisely this dynamic nature of the connection between actants that causes meanings to emerge. Therefore, gameplay does not arise only from human interpretations and actions in the game environment, but through the performance of specific spatial paths in the process of communication between different elements – human and non-human – that happens both inside the game object, as well as outside of its digital space.

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