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Weird Encounters in Virtual Worlds

Towards a theory of performative, anarchic counterplay as resistance

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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Taikalle

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ABSTRACT

This thesis suggests a basis for a new theoretical framework for performative and anarchic counterplay. Counterplay has been used in game studies to describe tactics and practices that are not intended by the designers of the game. Video games are culturally and artistically important medium – in addition to being a thoroughly capitalist one. My aim has been to search for new practices that have the potential to challenge hegemonic structures that do in many ways shape our understanding of our current society. Approaching gameplay from the point of view of performance creates new openings for both game studies and performance studies.

The theoretical framework comes from performance studies and games studies, enriched with posthumanist and new materialist strands. The material for this thesis has been collected from autoethnographic gameplay experimentation as well as from 'gameplay as performance' workshops organized for university students. The results have been published in four research articles, which demonstrate the progress of this research project from individual experiences towards new suggestions of anarchic, performative counterplay. Three of the articles deal with different adaptations of and experiments with the concept of counterplay. One of the articles suggests a taxonomy for analyzing the use of video games in performances, performance in video games, video games as performances and gameplay as performance. Together, the first three articles comprise a framework of performative counterplay. The fourth article then develops this framework further and introduces the concept of performative, anarchic counterplay.

Performative counterplay describes practices that engage with a specific game by applying the frame of performance into gameplay. It shifts the focus from the content of the game beyond the game to the rhizome of humans and non-humans, performance and gameplay. Anarchic counterplay takes a step further and forgets all conventions of gameplay altogether: it produces meanings by colliding norms and by embracing the randomness and the gratuitousness of the gameplay/performance rhizome. This thesis establishes new speculative practices that have the potential to challenge existing structures and hierarchies, both in the context of gameplay and performance.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä väitöskirjassa ehdotan perustaa uudelle esityksellisen ja anarkistisen vastaanpelaamisen teoreettiselle viitekehykselle. Vastapelaamista on käytetty pelitutkimuksessa kuvaamaan pelaajien harjoittamia taktiikoita ja käytäntöjä, jotka eivät ole pelin suunnittelijoiden alun perin tarkoittamia. Videopelit ovat kulttuurisesti ja taiteellisesti tärkeä mutta samalla myös läpeensä kapitalistinen medium. Tässä tutkimuksessa tavoitteeni on ollut etsiä uusia käytäntöjä, joiden avulla on mahdollista haastaa niitä hegemonisia rakenteita, jotka monin tavoin muokkaavat ymmärrystämme nykyisestä yhteiskunnastamme. Pelaamisen tarkastelu esityksen kontekstissa luo uusia avauksia sekä pelitutkimuksen että esitystutkimuksen aloille.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu esitystutkimuksesta ja pelitutkimuksesta täydennettynä posthumanistisilla ja uusmaterialistisilla säikeillä. Tutkimusmateriaali on kerätty autoetnografisista pelikokeiluista sekä yliopisto-opiskelijoille järjestetyistä peliesitystyöpajoista. Tulokset on julkaistu neljässä tutkimusartikkelissa, jotka kartoittavat tutkimusprojektin etenemisen yksilöllisistä kokemuksista kohti uusia ehdotuksia anarkistisesta, esityksellisestä vastaanpelaamisesta. Kolme artikkeleista käsittelee vastaanpelaamisen käsitteen erilaisia sovelluksia ja kokeiluja. Yhdessä artikkeleista ehdotetaan taksonomiaa, jolla analysoidaan videopelien käyttöä (teatteri)esityksissä, esityksiä videopeleissä, videopelejä esityksinä sekä pelaamista esityksenä. Yhdessä kolme ensimmäistä artikkelia muodostavat esityksellisen vastaanpelaamisen viitekehyksen. Neljännessä artikkelissa kehitetään tätä viitekehystä edelleen ja esitellään performatiivisen, anarkistisen vastaanpelaamisen käsite.

Esityksellisellä vastaanpelaamisella tarkoitan käytäntöjä, jotka tulevat näkyviin, kun peli ja pelaamiseen kehystetään esitykseksi. Se siirtää painopisteen pelin sisällöstä pelin ulkopuolelle inhimillisen ja ei-inhimillisen sekä esityksen ja pelaamisen rihmastoihin. Anarkistinen vastaanpelaaminen menee vielä pidemmälle ja unohtaa kaikki pelaamisen käytännöt kokonaan: se tuottaa merkityksiä törmäämällä normeihin ja omaksumalla pelin/esityksen rihmastojen satunnaisuuden ja vastikkeettomuuden. Tämä väitöskirja luo uusia spekulatiivisia käytäntöjä, jotka

voivat haastaa olemassa olevat rakenteet ja hierarkiat sekä pelin että esityksen konteksteissa.

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Article II   Huuhka, M. (2020). Playing is Performing: Video Games as Performance." In *Einspielungen: Prozesse und Situationen digitalen Spielens*, edited by Markus Spöhrer and Harald Waldrich. Springer Fachmedien.

Article III   Huuhka, M. (2021). Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops. *Body, Space & Technology* 20 (1).

Article IV   Huuhka, M. (2024). Anarchic Counterplay – Re-Imagining Gameplay as an Act of Performative Resistance. Accepted for publication in *Liminalities*.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background for the thesis

When I received my master's degree in theatre and drama research, I had already been playing video games for years – they were my favorite pastime. Thus, a leap from theatre to video games felt somewhat easy. I had written my master's thesis on queer animal representations in Finnish director and playwright Leea Klemola's plays *New Karleby* (2011) and *Jessikas Pup* (2012). During the doctoral school application process, I was mostly playing the open world role-playing game *Skyrim* (2011), the fifth part in *The Elder Scrolls* series. In *The Elder Scrolls* lore, there are two anthropomorphic animal races, khajits and argonians. These fictional races are loaded with stereotypes of both animal and actual human ethnic origins, and my first ideas for a PhD project revolved around discussing these representations. This idea got me accepted to doctoral studies, but it fast became clear to me that I didn't want to write another study of representations: I felt studying mere representations lost the performative potential embedded in gameplay practices. Researching representations is mostly focused on what already exists, and I felt it would be more important to focus on what could be, on potentialities. Thus, I had to find another topic, another way of doing research.

The sandbox building game *Minecraft* (2009) was immensely popular during the time I started working on my thesis, and I had already been playing it occasionally. I then acquired Microsoft's latest game console, the Xbox 360, for my office and started playing *Minecraft* at the same time to seek out possibly enticing research themes. I started to explore my existence in *Minecraft*, how it changed depending on how I was playing. Then I chose to do nothing at all, and as I watched the day change into night and back into day, I began to feel that in that moment, while doing nothing, something important that resonated with me with regard to both gameplay and performance. This nothingness was the beginning of a process creating new ways of understanding experiences between material and virtual.

What followed from that moment will be explained in more detail in this dissertation. For now, it suffices to say that there was a switch from representation

to presence, from consuming to creating, and from purely virtual or physical to hybrid experiences.

1.2   Reader's guide

The aim of my research is to create a new theoretical framework for performative and anarchic counterplay. If, as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter suggest, video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), and thus thoroughly operating on hypercapitalist modes of logic (even in the case of independent productions; Nieborg 2021), then the challenging theories and practices could perhaps be best realized through a medium that is thought to be fundamentally different from video games.

The term *counterplay* has been used in game studies to describe tactics and practices of players that are not intended by the designers of the game (Apperley 2010; Nakamura and Wirman 2005; Meades 2015), and my aim is to suggest new modes of counterplay that stem from the performative arts. In addition, I will argue that video games and especially gameplay are performative as they are processes of creating new movements, new content, and new narratives.

This thesis has its roots in performance research. The 'stage' here is both virtual and actual. It is comprised of video games and gameplay performances. Video games and gameplay as performance are thus the subject of this research. I will be using both terms in this thesis. With gameplay as performance, I point towards actual acts of gameplay, whereas games as performance indicates the video game(s) as a larger entity, comprised of the player, game, hardware, software, etc. Throughout this process, I have worked to bring together theories of gameplay and video games and gameplay as performance. There has been a lack of theory, although I have seen a growing interest in this issue in recent years. One example was the international online symposium titled "Live Performance and Video Games – Appropriations, Inspirations and Mutual Transfers" in October 2022. I had the honor to be a part of the scientific committee of the symposium and got to witness, for the first time during my research journey, people gathering to think about play as performance. The first approach to these topics was Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* from 1991 (1991), followed by game scholars such as Clara Fernández-Vara (2009). In performance studies, gameplay as performance has not been a visible subject, although in recent years, there has been lot of game-like, immersive performances that utilize mechanics, logics, and styles of gameplay such as Blast Theory's *Black*

Antler (2016), *Woyzeck Game* (2022) by Live Art Society, and *Adventures of Harriharri* (2020) by Harold Hejazi, to name a few. Interest in virtual and augmented realities also shows how performance practices as well as the concept of the stage are expanding from the real to the virtual. Or rather, the stage has always been virtual, but it has attracted increasing attention during recent years. French theater director, theoretician, and crucial figure for this research, Antonin Artaud, described theater as early as 1938 as having a *virtual reality* constructed of characters, images, objects and things (Artaud 1966, 50). I understand this virtual reality to describe the potential of both becoming and creation embedded in the performing arts.

Performance research has provided most of the conceptual and theoretical framework for my research, although the concept of counterplay comes from the field of game studies. The conceptual and theoretical framework is explained in Chapter 2. As the research material is based on actual performances made during this research process, it is accurate to label it as practice-as-research (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011). There are two different sets of material. The first are my own personal experiences as a player of *Minecraft*. In this sense, my research is autoethnographic. The second set of material is more extensive and consists of two workshops on 'gameplay as performance' organized at the University of Konstanz, Germany in 2017 and at the University of Tampere, Finland in 2019. This material expands the theoretical formulations from private experiences to collective ones. Methods and processes of material collection are discussed in Chapter 3.

This PhD thesis includes four articles that will later be referred to as Articles I, II, III and IV. The articles map the changing project: from solitary expeditions through collective workshops to theory formulation. Article I, "Journeys in Intensity: Human and Non-Human Co-Agency, Neuropower and Counterplay in Minecraft" (Huuhka 2019)*,* was published in 2019 in an anthology *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. In this article, I define counterplay as a counterforce to immersion and begin to sketch the concept of performative counterplay. Article II, "Playing is Performing: Video Games as Performance" (Huuhka 2020) was published in 2020 in an anthology titled *Einspielungen: Neue Perspektiven der Medienästhetik*. In it, I propose a taxonomy for analyzing the use of video games in performances, performance in video games and video games as performances. Article III of this thesis is titled "Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops" (Huuhka 2021). It was published in 2021 in the journal *Body, Space & Technology*. It dives deeper into possible practices of counterplay by analyzing performances from gameplay as performance workshops.

The fourth and last article is titled "Anarchic counterplay – Re-imagining gameplay as an act of performative resistance" (Huuhka 2024), and it has been accepted for publication in *Liminalities*. In this final article, I develop the concept of anarchic counterplay building from the ideas of theater director Antonin Artaud.

In the remaining part of this introductory chapter, I will focus on the main themes emerging from these four articles and end with a theoretical suggestion for new performative and anarchic counterplay.[1] I will introduce the concepts of gameplay as performance and performance as counterplay, and establish initial connections between theater, performance, gameplay and counterplay. Chapter 2 will guide the reader through the theoretical background of this work. We will move through various concepts of performance, game, gameplay, and counterplay and quickly touch upon new materialism and posthumanism. Chapter 3 will then provide a look into the methods and means of material collection for this thesis. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the practical cases of this study in more detail. Offering examples from my own experiences and from the workshops, I will explore video games and gameplay as performance, nonhuman agencies, and counterplay in action. The concluding Chapter 5 will establish new theoretical formulations on performative and anarchic counterplay.

1.3   Performative counterplay

Doing this research has been a journey through playful and theatrical moments, through playing alone and playing with others, of figuring out the relationship between theater/performance and video games/gameplay. It has not always been a straightforward one, and I must admit that I did not plan the contents of the articles from the beginning, but rather I have written them to reflect themes and ideas risen from the research process. Thus, all concepts, theories, and scholars are not present

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[1] As this thesis is an article-based one, the strategies of building its coherence differ from those used to compose a monograph. The articles have been written at certain points of the research process, and are unchangeable while other parameters, for example theoretical or methodological ones, change. Thus, this introduction to the articles reflects those exact articles, and as such can not be an exhaustive account of all themes and things that have arisen during this process. For this reason, there are some themes that are consistent throughout the articles, and some that are present only briefly.

in all articles[2]. As an article-based thesis mine thus lacks some of the coherence a manuscript thesis might have had, but I believe my experimentative approach on the project makes up some of the shortcomings.

One specific path has been defining what performative counterplay is. In the previous research, the term pops up here and there, mostly referring to performance as a tactic for creating counterplay. I myself have used it to distinguish counterplay produced inside the frame of performance from other types of counterplay. I will discuss the concept of counterplay further in Chapter 2, but to guide the reader, I suggest the following: performative counterplay is created by framing the gameplay situation – both on and off screen – as performance, and thus rejecting the rules of the game in question as completely as possible and simultaneously embracing the rules of the performance in question. Although I deal with concrete physical and virtual actions, the shift from gameplay to performance is conceptual.

In addition to performative counterplay, I talk about gameplay performances, video game performances, and gameplay as performance. Gameplay performances mean any performances made with games while playing them, video game performances include video games even if they are not being played and gameplay as performance refers to gameplay as performative actions. These definitions will be discussed further in Chapter 4; however, they will be used from time to time during our journey there to clarify theoretical and methodological points and to describe performances that comprise the research material.

In the fourth article, a new term, *anarchic counterplay,* emerges. In my research, *anarchic* refers to an attitude that is "lacking order, regularity, or definiteness" (Merriam Webster, n.d.-a). Anarchic counterplay can be seen as a subcategory of performative counterplay. It was born from the need to have a term that would specify the aim of the action. Not all performative counterplay is anarchic, performative counterplay can also be flowing with and not opposed to the structures and rules of the game. However, all performative counterplay has the potential to

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[2] This is especially true in the case of Antonin Artaud. While being a key component to theory formulation in Article IV, Artaud doesn't really feature in Articles I, II and III. This is due to the processual and article-based form of this dissertation: each article has been formed in accordance with the thematic and structural requirements of the publication in question. Thus, I have chosen to allow Artaud to enter the stage last, in the finale. All previous work nevertheless prepares the theoretical landscape discussed in Article IV.

become anarchic counterplay, it just needs a change in attitude to emerge. Thus, anarchic counterplay is an active process as well as an artistic practice. This work searches for unintended moments, weird coincidences, and unexpected encounters in virtual and real worlds. It lurks backstage in a virtual performance, gathering the bits and pieces of the excess of both gameplay and performance. It strives to fill the gaps in knowledge and in feeling – what happens when we perform, what happens when we play, what happens when they are the same?

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to building a new theory of counterplay. As will be discussed in Chapter 2.3, regardless of its original definition, counterplay has mainly been used to describe negative phenomena. Exceptions apply, and some of the tactics of counterplay are often referred to as something else than counterplay: cultural phenomena around video games are varied and lively. I believe it is crucial to develop new practices for challenging the cultural structures that have a profound impact on our understanding and vision of the contemporary world. In this sense, the counterplay I suggest works as an avantgarde practice both towards performance and video games, I do not try to suggest that all counterplay practices are similar, nor that my findings resonate with all existing practices. Rather, I suggest modes of counterplay that operate in a specific territory between game and performance, between play and resistance.

All hegemonic (cultural) phenomena have their counterparts: counterculture is an umbrella term for subcultures with values that oppose the widely accepted norms, beliefs, and practices of hegemonic culture (Haenfler 2022). It can be described as the tradition of breaking tradition, and thus something in the core of humanness (Goffman and Joy 2007, xvii). Video game culture offers openings for a variety subcultures (see, e.g., Mäyrä 2015; Carbone and Ruffino 2014; Mäyrä 2008), and within the game industry, there is a vibrant field of art games and indie games that produce active resistance to mainstream tendencies and trends regarding design, narrative and content conventions. The aim of this research, from the beginning, has been to find alternative ways to challenge the capitalist discourse on games and gameplay. My research is thus positioned in the continuum of countercultural gameplay practices.

My journey of finding alternative practices has taken me through solitary explorations and shared workshops. It has been full of different ways of doing 'otherwise'. Feminist idea of *doing otherwise* serves both as a theoretical and methodological term, and at the same time "a concept, an approach to analytics, and a method" as well as "an ethico-onto-political commitment to the insistence of the

possible against the pull of the probable" (Meek and Morales Fontanilla 2022). As Elisabeth Grosz writes:

> Feminist theory can become the provocation to think otherwise, to become otherwise. It can be a process of humbling of the pretensions of consciousness to knowledge and mastery and a spur to stimulate a process of opening oneself up to the otherness that is the world itself. (Grosz 2010, 52)

I have been doing otherwise physically, otherwise mentally, and most importantly, otherwise in relation to the idea of gameplay and games artifacts and cultural objects. Doing otherwise is critically important, it is the only way to make space for difference in a world of repetition.

2 KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is interdisciplinary as it combines performance research, games studies, and new materialist thinking. As my background is in theater and performance studies, they form the basis and an important theoretical frame for the study. Performance and gameplay have a common origin with rituals and play (Schechner 2003; McConachie 2011) and my research opens up a discussion of the similarities of playing and performing as artistic practice. For this reason, the focus of this research is on performance research rather than game studies. However, I believe these discussions benefit game scholars by opening new perspectives on gameplay.

Even if I am rooted in performance research, one of the most important concepts in this thesis, counterplay, comes from game studies and describes actions related to video games. For this reason, it is crucial to define play, game, and gameplay before defining counterplay. In this chapter, I will explain my understanding of the concept of performance, and then move on to play, games and counterplay, with the most emphasis on the latter. The latter part of this chapter is dedicated to complimentary research traditions that have affected this work significantly. These include the rhizomatic, theoretical thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, new materialism, and posthumanism. They have been helpful in building an understanding of performance and gameplay as rhizomatic, shared processes involving humans and non-humans.

2.1 Performance: selected definitions

My research is rooted in the field of performance research. From the point of view of performance research, games can be seen as spaces of performance. Marvin Carlson divides performance into three aspects: display of skills, patterned behavior, and keeping up the standard (Carlson 2018, 2–4).

The term *performance* has varied meanings, and those can get particularly messy, especially when talking of gameplay, where all types of performances – e.g., those of

competence, technological power, mastery of skills – are present. Thus, I have used terms like *artistic performance* to distinguish deliberately constructed performances from other types of performances. As a researcher, my interest lies in all sorts of performances, but it is important to distinguish different processes from each other. For example, in the Gameplay as Performance workshops, performance(s) also took place outside of the announced and framed performances and performance spaces: thus, the performances made by the students are part of a phenomenon that was present throughout the workshops.

Throughout this research process, my hypothesis has been that performance as action and as a concept has transformative potential. It has the power to reenchant the world by transforming the subjects and entities engaged in that performance: it emerges with and from the bodies of both performers and spectators, emergent meanings, and performative production of materiality. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 181) This reenchantment is set against the "disenchantment of the world" (Weber 2009, 155), by which Weber means the rationalization, bureaucratization and secularization of modern society. Reenchanting the world thus offers the possibility to reimagine our relationship with the world and each other through speculative processes.

To engage in these speculative processes of reenchantment, we can refer to Shannon Jackson, who has summed up discussions on performance thusly:

> performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real. (Jackson 2004, 15)

This quote explains how performance works, and especially how uninstitutional performance has the potential to create worlds, and on the other hand, not to create them. Jackson stresses that as performance is an interdisciplinary concept – or rather, a cluster of concepts – surrounded by interdisciplinary discussions, it should be allowed to be messy and swirly (*ibid.* 15).

To clarify these different strands of the concept, I will open Jackson's argument a bit. Performance as a concept is contradictory and can be interpreted through opposite ends of (specific) spectrums. For example, performance has been understood as repetition: patterned (Carlson 2018) or restored (Schechner 2013) behavior to adaptations such as Judith Butler's gender theory (Butler 2006). On the other hand, performance has also been interpreted as non-repeatable or recordable, something that becomes itself only through disappearance (Phelan 2003, 146).

Further, the divide between doing and seeing refers to action and representation: as I have argued in the introduction, my interest lies beyond representation, in the 'doing', but I don't deny the importance or rather unavoidability of representation in the performing arts.

In this research, I use the term performing instead of acting. Performing can be seen as an umbrella term, and acting as one specific subcategory of performing (Hulkko 2013, 96). Michael Kirby sees acting and not-acting as a continuum ranging from "complex acting" to "nonmatrixed performing". He writes that "to act means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate", and on the other end of the continuum, a performer does nothing to accomplish those things (Kirby 1990, 3–10). Pauliina Hulkko writes that a performer becomes a performer by simply starting to perform. Performer, unlike an actor, is not necessarily trained or skilled, and unlike the term actor, the term performer lacks certain evaluative connotations (Hulkko 2013, 97). Thus, the choice of the term performer allows one to look at the performances beyond the performers, and to avoid explicit emphasis on discussions of skill, talent, representation, and role.

Typically, theater and games have been researched through different traditions, though exceptions have happened. There is interest in performance/theater studies in LARP studies (Stenros et al. 2010), and in video games studies as well (e.g., Fernández-Vara 2009). For me, the most important connecting point between performance and games has been in the idea of gameplay as a creative practice.

2.1.1 Performing technologies

In the canon of western theater history, theater and technology have been linked since Ancient Greece: performing arts have developed together with audiovisual and other technologies starting from deus ex machina to virtual staging, mixed-reality performance and virtual performance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999; Salter 2010; Baugh 2005; Klich and Scheer 2011; M. Causey, Meehan, and O'Dwyer 2015; Jarvis 2019; Baía Reis and Ashmore 2022; Felton-Dansky 2018; Benford and Giannachi 2011). I see video games as a medium of performance as part of this continuum. Video games and especially gameplay as a practice are, however, different from the other media utilized by theater, as they are closer to performance than, for example, prerecorded video, as they happen live, once, and cannot be repeated precisely. Further, they are both forms of art that gain their meaning through live (mostly) human action.

I understand video games as active parts of the performances produced in the workshops. Thus, these performances are understood as intermedial and live media performances. Peggy Phelan has articulated that "performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies" (2003, 148). As my research deals with video game performances, presence is, at least partly, virtual and/or machinic, and the living body should be understood to be of varying materiality – from humans to machines and virtual entities. Intermedial performance (Phelan 2003) expands the concept of performance to take virtual and other differently mediated activities into account as equally important parts of any performance. It can be both actual and virtual, with bodies and experiences being present, absent, or both (Nelson 2010). Intermedial performances are created using different media of varying materialities, substances, and abilities. According to Chiel Kattenbelt, intermediality is about diversity: it is a montage, not a total work of art (Kattenbelt 2010, 35).

To deepen the idea of intermedial performance, I have used the concept of *live media performance*. Live media performance is a little-used term, which covers practices such VJing, live cinema, expanded cinema, and live coding (J. Scott 2015; Cooke 2010).[3] According to Grayson Cooke, live media performance happens in real time, as it lies in between modes of production and performance (Cooke 2010, 194). This means more than using a prerecorded video as a part of set design: the media is also produced live as is the human input. The emphasis is on the process of producing and creating a performance, rather than on the end result (J. Scott 2015).[4]

According to Cooke, live media performances that are created together with algorithms always include both intentional and unintentional elements – if the performance is based on arbitrarily generated content, there are bound to be surprises (Cooke 2010, 200–201). This also implies that the potential for

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[3] VJ means video jockey, i.e., a person who creates video compilations live in front of an audience. Live cinema refers to "any kind of film screening with additional performance or live interactivity inspired by the content of the film" ("Film Experiences - What Is Live Cinema?" 2023). Expanded cinema refers to "a film, video, multi-media performance or an immersive environment that pushes the boundaries of cinema and rejects the traditional one-way relationship between the audience and the screen" (Tate, n.d.). Finally, live coding refers to "a contemporary computer-based artform that manifests as performances that include 'on the fly' programming" (Mauro-Flude 2019).

[4] There are some game culture practices that fit into the definition for the most part. For example, live gameplay streaming on the platform Twitch combine modes of production and performance very much in the same way as the practice of gameplay as performance that I discuss, the only difference is the location of the spectator. This applies to esports as well, especially in those instances in which the audience witnesses it live both on location and streamed.

technological failure – glitches, bugs, errors, hardware malfunctions – is always present. In this sense, the concept of live media performance applies perfectly to video game performances, as the games are being played live as part of the performance, and that creates sort of an aura of possible failure, which is crucial to gameplay itself as Jesper Juul suggests (Juul 2013).

Various kinds of intermedial performances have gained more popularity largely due to the worldwide pandemic that began in 2020. Experiments were conducted via Zoom and other such online platforms, and hybrid performances, as well as virtual and augmented reality performances have been developed (e.g., Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger 2021; Roihankorpi et al. 2022; Brilli et al. 2023). However, there is still a gap in research when it comes to video games as forms and media of performance. My thesis is one approach on the subject – especially my article "Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops" (2021), in which I map out existing connections between games and performing arts. The results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

2.1.2   Performance as the potential of resistance

As discussed in Chapter 1, I am interested in the potential for change and *doing otherwise* in relation to performance practices. *Doing otherwise* is a methodological choice that enables discovering phenomena that are otherwise overlooked. It includes different kinds of revolutionary practices. As Fischer-Lichte (2008) suggests, performance has the power to reenchant the world. I believe this reenchantment offers space for new suggestions about our relationship to our current political systems: indeed, performance is about transforming. According to Denis Guénoun, theater is essentially political, as it involves the act of gathering in a public space (Guénoun 2007), and, in this research, the space of gathering can be physical, virtual, or even digital. The stage, which is in the center of a theater event, is a gathering, separated but still a part of it, and is where that community is presented to its members as otherwise. The stage can be seen as an empty signal, thus full of potential (Roihankorpi 2010, 93).

After writing Article I, the idea of looking at the practices of resistance began to grow, and I searched for a performance/theater theoretician who would be rebellious within the concept of performance as well as beyond it. By this, I mean to be able to challenge the conventions of their own field, as well as offering tools for critical thinking and rebellious practices in other fields as well. It is crucial to be able

to challenge any theoretical paradigm, especially when trying to pinpoint a possible beginning of new theoretical inquiries.

Thus, Antonin Artaud, a French director and theoretician, entered my research. Artaud is a controversial character, who has been on the one hand canonized as an avant-garde superstar, and on the other hand read as problematic and having fascist strands in his thinking (Jannarone 2011). For this reason, Artaud will be discussed through modern perspectives, and like in Article IV, kept as a guideline or a starting point for new ideas and practices related to gameplay as performance and video game performances[5].

Artaud writes in Theatre and the Plague:

> The dregs of the population, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed, enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. And at that moment the theater is born. The theater, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit. (Artaud 1970, 25)

This famous quote has in some way been present for a major part of my research journey. It has been there to symbolize both my understanding of performance as a process, and to emphasize the notion of the gratuitousness present both in theater and in games. As discussed in the fourth article (Huuhka 2024), gratuitousness is neither unproblematic nor an easy concept, and in some ways impossible, especially when it comes to playing video games. Further, Artaud has been there to wreak havoc on conformities and traditions (White 2018), and that aspect has offered me a tool of understanding – or rather not understanding – the chaotic nature of video game performances.

The idea of theater/performance and gameplay as pointless, gratuitous activities does not mean that they cannot be important or meaningful for performers, players and/or spectators. Rather, the aim has been to find ways of producing knowledge without the burden of producing knowledge – to be able to give space for unexpected things, ideas, and concepts to emerge.

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[5] I have to stress that my take on Artaud is adaptive. I examine the idea of resistance, and the resistance needed in or relevant to the context of this thesis is significantly different from the resistance Artaud's work embodied. Artaud had violent visions, while the violence I propose is violence towards structures which – as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 – often manifests through peaceful, antiviolent actions. One might argue that my interpretation of Artaud is philosophical rather than practical.

2.2 Play, game, and art game

Play, game and gameplay are all concepts that are contested and can be understood in multiple ways depending on the interests, positions, and theoretical stance of the user. Therefore, this chapter will not offer a thorough account of them all, but rather a glimpse into theories and viewpoints that have proven to be crucial to my research.

2.2.1 Play, game, and gameplay

In the previous chapter, I discussed the concept of performance. Performance and play are related, they stem from the same origin of human behavior (Schechner 2003). The theory of play builds on the writings of Johan Huizinga (1949), and Roger Caillois (2001), and is conducted inside game studies as well as in other fields, such as pedagogy, philosophy, communication studies, cultural studies, and social sciences (Maclean et al. 2013; Johnson 2015; Nwokah 2010; Patte & Sutterby 2016).

Johan Huizinga wrote in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens – A Study of the Play Element in Culture* play to be separate from everyday life, and to be a prerequisite for culture to exist. In addition, he stated that "no profit can be gained by it" (Huizinga 1949, 13).[6] In 1958, Roger Caillois expanded Huizinga's formulation, and described play to be an activity that is *free*, *separate*, *uncertain*, *unproductive*, *governed by rules*, and *make-believe* (Caillois 2001, 9–10). Both Huizinga and Caillois are classics of play research that have been since utilized and criticized (e.g., Stenros 2015).

There are countless definitions and conceptualizations of play,[7] and I will offer a selection of them here, just to show the reader the scope of the phenomenon and the research around it. In a nutshell, play is "free movement in a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 304). Play is liminal (Turner 1986), ambiguous (Sutton-Smith 1997), elusive in form (Myers 2010, 9), potentially bad (Sutterby 2009), understood to be not only in/of/as but also through culture (O'Donnell 2014), and "the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own

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[6] This notion of no profit resonates with Artaud's demand for gratuitousness.

[7] Jaakko Stenros has collected a myriad of definitions of play and games in his doctoral thesis (Stenros 2015). Readers interested in the ontological debate around the subject should begin their journey from there.

pure joy" (Nachmanovitch 1990, 43). Seth Giddings has sketched the *protopolitics of play*, in which

> realities, agencies, activities and passivities and meta-games seem not only to reproduce cultural and social forms, but also to generate new times, spaces and assemblages – new realities. (Giddings 2005, 139)

Thus, play is about creating new words, and as Giddens mentions, simulational (*ibid.* 155) and always in some way virtual (*ibid. 3).*

To deepen the concept of play, I turn to Miguel Sicart. Sicart proposes that play can be understood as "a portable tool for being", and not related to objects or events, but rather brought by people to the assemblages for everyday life (Sicart 2014, 2). Play is contextual, and it emerges in relation to specific artifacts, people, places, situations, and/or designed environments such as video games. These contexts are framed by shared rules, which can be rigid as in sports or whimsy like in children's play, and they can be renegotiated (*ibid.* 7-9). Sicart sees play as a way of being in the world in the same way as "languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth". Play is pleasurable, but not always fun: rather, it can be dangerous, hurtful, dark, carnivalesque, and destructive. It is "movement between order and chaos" engaged in either solo or collectively (*ibid.* 3-4). Sicart sees play as a process of production rather than consumption, and thus crucial as a counterforce in an era of efficacy. He writes:

> Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance. (*ibid.* 6)

This approach coherently describes my approach to both play and counterplay. Play is a process of exploration, and it includes both creative and destructively creative moments. Play operates beyond morality – or rather it operates regardless of it. In play, you are free to make choices that are horrible and questionable. As Sicart writes, this is important because we need challenge values to turn them into mindful practices (*ibid.* 5). Play moves between order and chaos, between the will to create and the will to destroy. Sicart refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on carnival to describe play as a force that creates space and freedom from oppressive forces, even if only temporarily. Play (and here especially games) as carnivalesque actions can lead to "a festive liberation in search from freedom, expression, and truth" (*ibid.* 11). Artaud's ideal theater resonates with Bakhtin's carnival. Artaud was aiming for theater that abolished the borders between performers and audience, as well as

destroy dualisms such as of mind and matter (Cunliffe 1993). Artaud's approach can be understood as carnivalesque in the same manner as play – or further, as a mode of play.

The idea of play as liberation and in many ways, revolutionary, is at the core of my research. Being rebellious with something 'fixed' such as a programmed computer game might feel problematic unless we accept that "play and computation [- -] both are ways of expressively being in the world" (Sicart 2014, 99). Applying carnivalesque logic to something rigid can create new knowledge.

> In the age of computing machinery, we need to see play as both playing systems and playing with systems, as appropriation and resistance of systems. Computers give us the pleasure of bound, limited, logical experiences; play gives the pleasure of breaking those boundaries and making them ours. Play allows us to reambiguate systems designed for clarity and efficiency. If system thinking creates patterns to explain, understand, and express the world, play appropriates to sometimes disrupt patterns for the sake of expression. (*ibid.* 98)

This idea, play as an instrument to undo boundaries and structures for pleasure is present in the practical experiments conducted as part of this research: for example, in the workshops, a playful attitude was dominant over competitive or serious mindsets.

The concept of 'game' has been debated in game studies since the emergence of the research field. There are various ways of defining and categorizing games, none of which can include all aspects of all things considered as games (Elias et al. 2012, 5). Things we call 'games' are rule systems (Salen and Zimmerman 2004), physical objects, extensions of play, simulations, leisure, work, mess (Bogost 2009), places of labor, media of the hypercapitalist Empire (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), immersive (Calleja 2011), semiotic machines (Myers 2010, 5) facilitators of behavior (Aarseth 2007, 130), means of anti-control (Myers 2010, 70), – the list goes on. To understand what is meant by a game in this thesis, it suffices to say that game is whatever we understand to be a game. As Elias et al. write: "a 'game' is whatever is labeled a game in common parlance" (Elias et al. 2012, 6).

Gameplay, as defined by Salen and Zimmerman, is the interaction that happens when players follow the rules of the game and experience the system of the game through play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 303). Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. define gameplay as "the game dynamics emerging from the interplay between rules and game geography" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2012, 121). For Juul, gameplay describes how the game operates and how the player interacts and experiences it (Juul 2014,

216), and Adams writes that gameplay "consists of the challenges and actions the game offers the player" (Adams 2013, 8). Thus, gameplay points to the actual actions taken in the game, and it refers to both physical and virtual processes. Gameplay performances are not always, one might argue never, actually gameplay, but rather something that happens when gameplay is performed – perhaps it can be understood as play with the concept of gameplay. Like any other action or object on the stage, any action in performance is both fictional and real at the same time, it has its original meaning and that which the frame of performance applies to it (States 1985; 1996).

2.2.2   Games as art, games as theater

There is a lot of discussion of games as art (e.g., Smuts 2005; Kirkpatrick 2011; Sharp 2015; Deardorff 2015; Bourgonjon et al. 2017; Bosman and Wieringen 2022). Are games art in their own right, as any other cultural product, such as a book, play, or a movie? Or are games art visually and/or through their narrative qualities? Or is gameplay art? And what separates art games from 'not-art' games? In this chapter, I will approach this phenomenon from two perspectives: prior research on video games as theater and on video games as art.

2.2.2.1   Video games as theater

I have been mostly interested in looking at gameplay as a way of making (possibly) art, and in specifically thinking of gameplay as performative. C. Thi Nguyen has argued that games allow us players to express and describe different forms of agency (Nguyen 2020), and this approach sets an illustrative background for thinking of gameplay as performance/performative. I have discussed the relationship between games and performance more thoroughly in Article II (Huuhka 2020), but here I will provide a quick overview of the most popular writings on the subject.

Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991) is often quoted as the first work on the subject. Laurel's book explores structural similarities and possibilities between theater and user interfaces – the book thus expands dramatic possibilities from narratives to agencies and structures. Laurel's take on computer-human interaction, the "*poetics* of human-computer activity" (*ibid.* xix) as theater is based on Aristotle's *Poetics* (1968). Aristotle defined structure for drama, and Laurel aimed to form a theory of structure for representations created by humans and computers together, and that could be beneficial for, for example, design practices (*ibid.* xix). Laurel notes

that drama already includes the idea of performance, parallel to interface design, that is meant to be actualized through using it. Further, both theater and computers have an element of behind-the-scenes magic that produces the representations seen and ensures everything works as planned (*ibid.* 15-17). Laurel writes that theater is a good foundation for thinking about human-computer experiences, because they both have an objective of "representing action with multiple agents" and because theater offers an understandable metaphor for understanding the issue (*ibid.* 21).

Laurel's approach has pioneer value, however my approach to the subject is less formal: I am not discussing guidelines for design or development, but rather emphasizing the arbitrary and chaotic side of the phenomenon. Further, Laurel focuses on representations, and I have been steering away from representational analysis. However, the whole setting of thinking of human-computer experiences as more than just tools for something is interesting. Laurel writes that human-computer-interaction design is

> about creating imaginary worlds that have a special relationship to reality – worlds in which we can extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel, and act. (*ibid.* 33)

Even if Laurel focuses on representations, the above quote offers a way to think about the actual interaction behind representation, and as such, resonates with what I aimed for with gameplay as performance workshops.

Clara Fernández-Vara has suggested a framework for studying video games as performance. Fernández-Vara follows performance scholars Richard Schechner and Patrice Pavis and builds their model on a tripartite model of theatrical performance consisting of dramatic text (script or score), performance (actors acting out the text) and mise-en-scéne (confrontation between the text and performance) by replacing them with code, runtime, and interaction in the context of video games. Software, or the code of the game works as the script of play by providing instructions for the computer to run it. Runtime thus correlates with performance, although computers cannot improvise with the instructions unlike human actors with the script. The performance comes together through the interactor, the player, who puts things in motion. Compared to the spectator of theatrical performance, the interactor has more effect on the end product: the player performs together with the computer. Fernández-Vara mentions that breaking the divide between mise-en-scéne and performance can be challenged and broken through, but in a software context, it has to happen in order for the performance to come through (Fernández-Vara 2009, 5). There are, of course other less direct ways in which the live audience affects a

theatrical performance, but in the context of software as performance, physical actions are needed.

To further develop this framework, Fernández-Vara applies another model, MDA framework, which was formulated to create a bridge between game design and game criticism/research.[8] MDA comes from mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics, which correlate with the models previously discussed. Mechanics include all aspects that are needed to play the game: rules, objects, and space. It correlates with code and the dramatic text; it is the pre-set text that forms the foundation. Dynamics refers to the ways those rules are performed, it is thus parallel to the code running and the performance on stage. Aesthetics refers to the gameplay experience, which happens as result of interactions between the player and system, bringing it back to the mise-en-scéne (*ibid.* 5–6). Fernández-Vara argues that the relationship between mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics is crucial to understanding (video) games as performance. As the dramatic text is the scheme for performance theater, dynamics provide for dynamic system behavior. The end experience, mise-en-scéne or aesthetics, stem from the relationship of the two prior and is not dictated but created in the process. The player is positioned in a double role, being both the performer and the spectator, and this gives video games as performance its special qualities (*ibid.* 6).

Fernández-Vara also discusses Schechner's notion of restoration of behavior in the context of gameplay, stating that "performance of the player is a negotiation between scripted behaviors and improvisation based on the system" (*ibid.* 7). So the gameplay performance emerges from repeating and re-inventing the actions afforded by the game. Like Laurel's model, Fernández-Vara's model is a valid framework for structural analysis, but as stated, I am interested in more arbitrary emergent performances.

2.2.2.2   Video games as art and art games

I consider video games to be a form of art. New forms of art that emerge from new technologies tend to initially be shunned from the art world. This has happened to photography, cinema, and video games as well (Martin 2007, 347). Video games are visual, auditive, and narrative art, they are representational artifacts created by people

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[8] The MDA model was originally introduced by Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek (Hunicke et al. 2004). I will focus on Fernández-Vara's application of it.

who might be rightfully called artists (Tavinor 2009, 174), but also an art form in their own right in the sense that they offer "active exploratory aesthetics" (Tavinor 2009, 3). There are other forms of art that utilize video games as medium, such as *videogame art* and *machinima,*[9] but they often lack playability and are therefore not considered games in the strictest sense (*ibid.* 173). I consider all video games to be art, some more interesting than others, but art, nonetheless. I also think the most important quality of video games as art is their playability, not aesthetic or narrative qualities. This ties in with the idea of gameplay as performance: in my research, I focus on the actions of the performers rather than the aesthetics of the performance.

To clarify: video games are art, and *art games* are another genre of games or gamelike objects. The term *art games* is usually in reference to more experimental games or simulations, which have other values than playability. Game scholar Olli Tapio Leino has argued that art games are impossible, as many of them lack the possibility of failure, which is crucial for the gameplay condition (Leino 2022). Leino continues that art games are satisfactory neither to the artist or the player, as their interests are in opposition to each other. Art games that are closer to interactive art lack the gameplay condition, which is probably boring, and thus not good for the player. Art games with the gameplay condition, however, are not good for the artist, as the playability shifts the focus to gameplay and the players' performance. (Leino 2022)

Even if I am not as skeptical as Leino of the possibilities of art games, I do agree that the possibility of failure does play a big role in my work. Counterplay or any sort of opposition to game logics and mechanics requires them to exist in the first place and offer something to rebel against. Counterplay in art games is also possible but requires different tactics than more mainstream games. This makes sense if we consider counterplay to be a certain type of art in itself – counterplay could well be thought of as the avant-garde of gameplay.

Nevertheless, all the games mentioned and played during this thesis are art. Some are more popular than others, but all are playable artworks, that are shaping our era.

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[9] Machinima refers to the "use of real-time 3-D graphics to generate computer animation" (Collins English Dictionary 2023).

2.3 Counterplay: previous definitions

Cambridge Dictionary defines counterplay as "an attacking move or series of moves by a player in a weaker position in a game, especially in chess" (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Merriam-Webster adds that counterplay can mean "interaction or contrast between opposing or dissimilar elements" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). The first definition positions the subject (in this dissertation, the player) as the underdog, as the protagonist going against a stronger opponent. Indeed, if we think of a single player performing against a popular video game (backed up by the studio, designers, producers, player communities, etc.), it seems like somewhat of an accurate description. However, I do find the second definition, interaction between dissimilar elements, intriguing. I think that that definition, rather than any battle metaphor, describes my understanding of counterplay. It introduces something strange to the event of gameplay.

Counterplay has been discussed little in game studies thus far, and the previous accounts are somewhat contradictory. From potentially empowering tactics of playful resistance (Nakamura and Wirman 2005) to anti-social and oppositional, even criminal, ways of playing (Meades 2015), counterplay can be understood in many ways, depending on the context. The examples I have chosen to include in this chapter demonstrate the variety and scale of these sorts of actions and practices in the player communities and game worlds. Based on this discussion, I will map out the territory of performative counterplay in Chapter 4.[10]

2.3.1 Counterplay as immaterial labor

One of the earliest mentions of counterplay is from Greig de Peuter's and Nick Dyer-Witheford's 2005 article "Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Immaterial Game Labour". The article discusses gameplay labor as a crucial part of commercial game development: mobilization of game labor. The main topic is the exploitation of the workers in the game industry during the early 2000s, i.e., the irony of 'work as play' during 80-hour workweeks. De Peuter and Dyer-

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[10] The practices described in this chapter offer a wide but not completely exhaustive view on the subject. For example, practices such as speedrunning (Scully-Blaker 2014) and utilizing glitches and cheats in gameplay (Bainbridge and Bainbridge 2007) have been omitted due to the fact these practices, even while breaking the intended rhythm of gameplay, aim for certain success within the game.

Witheford mention that game companies make profits by capturing counterplay, in other words, they profit from players creating new content and new ways of playing (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2005). This system has its countermovement, which the authors call *counter-mobilization*. This involves various practices, such as "digital piracy, autonomous production, tactical games, and simulated counter-planning". The writers argue that these acts of countermobilization line up with counter-globalization movements, searching for new anti-commercial ways of using new media and resisting the commodification of life forms, including those of players (*ibid.*). According to the article, piracy was the most threatening form of gamer resistance in the early 2000s, as it meant direct losses to the companies. Another practice that especially threatened the intellectual property rights was modding, which the authors describe as a "vibrant practice". The modders often mixed games and other traits from other popular culture products, creating commons by mixing properties of different enterprises while rigorously protecting their own (*ibid.*). All modding is not rebellious or even forbidden, a lot of games do now invite players to create content: indeed, game labor continues to be used in value production.

De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford position counterplay and other related practices as being in opposition to capitalist and hierarchical structures. In this way, it differs a lot from later applications of counterplay, which tend to emphasize either the aspect of fun rebellion or illegal, destructive action. This approach categorizes counterplay as activism and sees a lot of potential in these collective digital practices. At the end of the article de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford remind readers that the origins of the interactive entertainment industry lie with researchers seeking a break from their military tasks (*ibid.*). In other words, the games industry is based on counter-acts, playfulness and exploring beyond allocated premises. It seems – as we will see from the following subchapters – that the whole concept of counterplay is about balancing right and wrong, finding the allowed amount of rebellion.

Countergaming is a term that is related to counterplay, but outside the scope of this thesis. Countergaming practice, often talked about as modding, has the tendency to be adapted by game companies. Many games utilize player-created content, and some even offer tools for modding within the game. Countergaming happens at the level of the code – this means that the changes are made to the aesthetics and – at times – to the playability of the game itself. Alexander Galloway has written that countergaming has the potential to be radical, in the sense that it could offer actual critique of gameplay, and create grammars of playing, instead of focusing on visual aspects. Galloway claims that by doing that, countergaming could, in the future,

redefine play and uncover "its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde" (Galloway 2006, 125–26). In this sense, countergaming is not the subject of performance research, but rather a way of enacting virtual art and activism.[11]

2.3.2   Girlish counter-playing tactics

In the 2005 article "Girlish Counter-Playing Tactics", Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman explore, based on earlier research on girls' preferences concerning video games, potential tactics on how to counterplay games that are designed for and by men.[12] This approach is backed by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1984)*,* in which de Certeau explores ways in which consumers take ownership of mass-produced culture. De Certeau distinguishes strategies from tactics: strategies refer to architecture for dominant institutions and their objectives, it refers to how, for example, rationalities of science, politics or economics are constructed. Tactics, on the other hand, refer to individual actions that challenge the spaces created through strategies. De Certeau writes:

> strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, [- -] whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces. (*ibid.* 30)

According to de Certeau, everyday practices - such as talking, reading, cooking, watching television, etc. – are tactical. Tactics allow people to gain small victories over dominant strategies by seizing opportunities, but as tactics do not have a place, these victories are dependent on time, not space. As de Certeau states: "whatever it wins, it does not keep" (*ibid.* xix).

Following de Certeau, Nakamura and Wirman divide the game event into strategy and tactics. Strategy implies here the entire gameworld as well as the rules of the game. It controls the player by setting the parameters of possible actions within the game. *Tactics* are the ways the player/consumer navigates and operates in the space defined by dominant cultural powers. Nakamura and Wirman point out that for de Certeau, tactics are meant to take control of events and acquire small triumphs over hegemonic structures. Based on these small victories, Nakamura and Wirman define

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[11] Mary Flanagan has written about alternative, radical game design as a way for activists and artists to challenge the embedded norms of game culture(s) (Flanagan 2009).

[12] A lot has changed in 20 years, and the game industry has become more diverse. However, the same preconceptions of 'girls' as less competent players are still strong (Kelly et al. 2023).

the girlish counter-play as an application of "a girlish tactic to a male-targeted game" (Nakamura and Wirman 2005).

Nakamura and Wirman suggest three groups of possible tactics: character-related, player actions, and parts, for example, logical or visual, of the game system. Character-related tactics include choosing female characters and developing characters. Player actions include focusing on social relations, non-violence, co-operation, and taking care of characters. Tactics involving the game system include realistic settings, a peaceful pace, interest in storylines and seeking out alternative paths (*ibid.*). All of these tactics are non-invasive towards the game, meaning they do not alter anything in the physical or digital body of the game, but are strictly about (gameplay) actions and choices.

This categorization provides a starting point for my formulations of performative counterplay, even though the goal, unlike in performative counterplay, is to advance and succeed in the game, just with alternative or unexpected means. However, the idea of opposition to hegemonic structures and resistance through positive, caring actions, whether to oneself or the community, resonate with performative counterplay.

2.3.3 Counterplay as unanticipated action

Game scholar Tom Apperley writes that counterplay happens when the actions of the player lead to results not anticipated by the designers of the game. These actions can be either differing results to the programming outcomes, or unexpected in-game actions (Apperley 2010, 103). Even though counterplay happens in virtual game spaces, it can expand to physical spaces by mobilizing the gaming body, including humans, hardware, and actual gaming spaces. Apperley writes that counterplay is not hacking, but it requires some sort of understanding of the limits of virtual game spaces and gameplay. Counterplay operates in the material borders of video games: the players, game objects, AI, glitches, and everything else present at the gaming event (*ibid.* 103).

According to Apperley, counterplay shows how the relationships between games and players are not static and merely compulsory, but rather fluctuate between practice and training, adaptation, and compulsion (*ibid.* 102). Counterplay challenges the hierarchy of the gameplay situation, as it enables an antagonistic relationship between the player and the game. Apperley writes that this conflict is with the ludic

rules that control everything in the game: "configurations, processes, rhythms, spaces, and structures". This conflict is thus different than the one with the content, simulated foes, goals, and challenges (*ibid.* 102-103). Counterplay as a concept emphasizes that games and gameplay as an activity are more than "just games", but rather processes of control and discipline challenged by openings of innovation (*ibid.* 103). Apperley concludes the discussion of the concept of counterplay:

> Counterplay is more than the creative actions of the individual player during the process of adapting to the highly structured game environments, it also encapsulates the adaptation to compulsions that makes digital games a crucially important medium for the contemporary society of control. (*ibid.* 114)

Like Nakamura and Wirman, Apperley also sees counterplay as a possible tool for challenging hierarchies, and as the potentiality to search for one's place through games in the capitalist, consumerist society. Counterplay is not, however, somehow isolated from being utilized by industry: Apperley also points out different ways that the game industries use players as (free) labor, for example, working as beta testers for games in development. This can be seen as the game industry profiting from the players, for example, adapting their tactics and new modes of play to the actual games. Players also find problems and report them, which is also another way of adding value to the industry through gamer labor. Even though work is usually unpaid, the gamers gain social capital by being a part of the game development process (*ibid.* 103-104).[13]

How does counterplay then connect to the everyday? If counterplay is a tool of challenging pre-existing modes of playing, and, if we believe that video games matter outside of the gaming event, counterplay as an activity must matter as well. Apperley points out that when talking about serious games, we acknowledge that they are pervasive, and this gives counterplay potential to discuss arguments and ideological structures presented and present in games (*ibid.* 109). This clearly demonstrates how counterplay takes place both in the gameworld and the actual, physical gameplay space and its surroundings. Counterplay makes the limits of algorithmic culture visible: to be played, the game must align with the rhythm of everyday and the situated player, and counterplay practices draw from precisely these everyday rhythms, and thus creates a margin of free, unconventional play (*ibid.* 132).

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[13] Gamer labor, game workers, gamification of labor, and their exploitation is a much more complex phenomenon, which I cannot cover here thoroughly. For more information on the subject, see, for example Kim (2018), McCutcheon and Hitchens (2020) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006).

Apperley discusses two emergent counterplay practices, *resonance* and *exploits*, in more detail. Resonance refers to the effects of player actions on certain, local situations or contexts. Exploits refers to the practices that find and then exploit anomalies, such as glitches, in games (*ibid.* 134-135). According to Apperley, players can deliberately configure the game to either resonate or show dissonance with the game world and the real world. Examples of this are when players create avatars that refer to other worlds, real or fictional, or when players deliberately play historical games, such as Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991-) saga, to create alternative pasts and futures. Apperley calls this configurative resonance, and it creates a "contextual significance" that resonates with the experiences from everyday life through players' specific actions (*ibid.* 135). The depth and consequences of counterplay depend on the players' position relative to, for example, hierarchical structures and power: in other words, it depends on what players are playing against. These kinds of practices can also be very subtle, and the resistance can be purely symbolic to the player.

Another form of counterplay discussed by Apperley is exploitation: griefing and gold farming – making profit by selling virtual goods to other players (Lehdonvirta 2019) – serve as examples of this type of play. In game studies, the concept of *exploits* has been defined as "holes in existent technologies" (Apperley 2010, 13); actions allowed by the game and not intended by the designers (*ibid.* 15); and potentially non-deliberate actions found by the players (*ibid.* 16). All these examples suggest actions that somehow are removed from the norm of the game, yet happen within the structure of the game. Apperley suggests exploits are a form of counterplay rather than counter-gaming, as it doesn't require new additions to the software (*ibid.* 138). *Griefing* is the act of exploiting the social rules of games, especially MMORPGs by causing as much annoyance as possible to other players. This can mean disturbing the flow of gameplay by harassing and bullying, to even "politiciz(ing) gamespace by establishing resonance between the virtual world of the game and real world events" (*ibid.* 139). Gold farming on the other hand refers to practices that strive to create as much "game liquidity" as possible, often exploiting other players (*ibid.* 139).

Apperley summarizes the concept of counterplay, and its significance as follows:

> The oscillating rhythms between: training and practice; and counterplay and its capture, feed into forms of control as well as forms of practice and innovation. As practices of counterplay expand the margin of digital game play into new territories, and new corporate iterations of gaming seek to re-territorialize it, new forms of play and counterplay emerge. (*ibid.* 147-148)

Apperley seems to think that even if some counterplay practices are "dark" and even malicious, that is only part of the picture. What stands out is the emphasis on the creative and critical potential of counterplay. This potential is also the key feature of performative counterplay: to critique, ridicule and create new worlds. Apperley writes:

> Counterplay, as form of creative and adaptive practices, establishes new forms of digital game play inside, and tangential to, the coded limits of the game space. At stake in these practices is a basic ambiguity about the role that play has in society: is it a form of discipline or training? Or does it establish new relations, connections, conceptions and modes of being? (*ibid.* 145)

Counterplay is thus a creative and critical practice, that has the potential to challenge existing norms and concepts and create new worlds.

2.3.4 Counterplay, dark play, and destructive practices

In his book *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games* (2015), Alan Meades takes on a more pessimistic approach to counterplay. Counterplay is used as an umbrella term for play that is "oppositional, anti-social, and even criminal by its players and observers" and that it offers a "dynamic that works against rules, against other players, seeks alternate ways of playing and potentially different pleasures" (Meades 2015, 1). Meades concentrates on multiplayer games, and these practices are thus often directed to other players, or even against game companies, and can even cross the line of what is defined as legal by applicable laws and/or the internal rules of those companies (*ibid.* 17–19). These practices include, among others, cheating, grief-play, hacking, trolling, piracy, offensive behavior, and modding (*ibid.* 24),[14] and according to Meades, it is fairly common among players, either as something they do or as something they witness (*ibid.* 1), even though engaging in counterplay accepts the risk of eventually being punished (*ibid.* 6).

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[14] Let us clarify some of the less known terms on this list. Grief-play means taking pleasure in sabotaging other players' gameplay experience (Jørgensen and Karlsen 2019a, 2). Hacking refers to gaining "illegal access to (a computer network, system, etc.)" but is also defined as "to manage successfully" (Merriam Webster 2023). *Trolling* refers to "a deliberate act [- -] of making random unsolicited and/or controversial comments on various internet forums with the intent to provoke an emotional [- -] reaction from unsuspecting readers to engage in a fight or argument" (Urban Dictionary 2014). Modding refers to "the activity of making changes to computer or games software or hardware' (Cambridge Dictionary 2023).

Meades sees that Richard Schechner's notion of "dark play" encompasses the range of counterplay quite thoroughly (*ibid.* 21). Schechner writes that dark play happens when "contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out" (*ibid.* 21) and that it can be conscious but also happen when some or all players do not know it is happening; it can be shared or concealed. It breaks its own rules, challenging the whole act of play in the process, and different from publicly accepted modes of disruption, such as carnivals, it does not strive for integration but rather for "disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification". Schechner points out that dark play does not need to be violent or aggressive, and that it is context related: what is offensive to one is harmless or fun to another (Schechner 1993, 36). The examples Schechner uses are of people engaging in dark play in public situations. It basically means pushing the limits of social or societal situations, making other people part of the play (or performance) whether they know it or not. Dark play involves some sort of risk, physical or social; it is confusing and may hide the frame of play; it may be continued from childhood; it doesn't necessarily need imaginary play; and, I think most importantly, it "plays out alternative selves", often so that it is done in secret (*ibid.* 37–39).

Meades argues that dark play violates certain principles of "contemporary Western play values".[15] First, it rejects rules in unexpected ways (Meades 2015, 21). Meades probably means that there are some gameplay practices that ignore and twist rules, but do so in an accepted and understandable manner, unlike dark play or counterplay. Second, if there is uncertainty of what is play and what is not; metacommunication is lost. Third, the application of destructive tactics, and physical, emotional, symbolic, and financial violence towards systems or individuals. This riskiness leads to uncertainty towards the possible outcomes of the situation (*ibid.* 21). Meades continues by describing the dark players engaging in counterplay somewhat beside themselves, not fully aware of the risks or fully in control. Quite curiously, Meades writes that dark play is "best regarded as a semi-autonomous performance or dance, one that can be guided and nudged but never truly controlled" (*ibid.* 22). I agree that counterplay can be regarded as a performance, but I disagree without the notion of it being out of control – or at least more than any other type of play.

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[15] I am not sure what these values are, and how exactly Western play values can be defined. A lot of gamers and players come from regions that are not defined as Western, and still engage in play within the same social rules.

Meades lists several qualities – such as pleasure, status, and danger – and modes – such as hacking, grief-play and piracy – of counterplay (*ibid.* 23-24*)*. Even though the qualities of counterplay Meades lists are potentially positive, the list of practices following it are plainly negative and potentially offensive, illegal, and harmful. Is it not possible, going back to Nakamura, Wirman and "Girlish Counter-Playing Tactics", to get these same experiences by not being merely destructive?[16] The last phrase on the list of counterplay qualities is:

> Counterplay is only really understood when it has finished or, to be more precise, once counterplay is finished it is translated into a narrative that explains its motivations, purpose, and meaning (*ibid.* 23).

I disagree with the idea that counterplay could only be understood through constructing a narrative and searching for motivation or purpose. My examples in Chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate that most counterplay is gratuitous, arbitrary and stems from wild experimentation.

2.3.5   Transgressive play

Espen Aarseth writes that the potential player must receive some instructions to become a player, in other words, a player is created through instructions and the learning process. This can be a social experience, but in the case of especially single-player video games, this happens with the game itself, thus the player becomes defined as a player in relation to the game, its rules and its structures. (Aarseth 2007, 130)

An implied player is the player expected to play the game, a role offered to the player. This implied player fills the expectations of the game to reach the game as intended. An implied player is not enough to describe player behavior, as games sometimes allow for actions other than the anticipated ones. These actions might end up being important events for the player, or vilified as destructive behavior (*ibid.* 132).

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[16] There is no mention of Nakamura and Wirman's article on Meades' book, which can be interpreted as a deliberate choice to focus on the more sinister, "serious" shades of counterplay over the "girlish" ones.

> Transgressive play is a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself. (*ibid.* 132)

Indeed, what Aarseth discusses here covers a lot of the actions labeled as counterplay in this chapter. However, Aarseth also includes funny occurrences and weird coincidences caused by the game or bugs, and some of the things do not describe deliberate acts of rebellion, but rather interesting events and occurrences that remind the player of the possibility of gaining control over the game, even if only briefly. (*ibid.* 133)

Finding rebellious agency in small moments seems to be in the center of Aarseth's notion, even if some of the things described do affect a lot of players. What is significant is that the idea of transgressive play can be nice, neutral, or negative, meaning that the actions and their consequences are two different things.[17]

2.3.6   Redefining counterplay

As shown in previous sections, counterplay can be understood in different ways. Even though I don't agree all counterplay has negative influence on others, I do agree that the practices Meades describes are real and are problematic and cause a lot of harm. However, if you compare these practices with those suggested by Nakamura and Wirman, the difference couldn't be more obvious.

Common to all definitions is the emphasis of player-initiated creativity and exploration of actions directly prompted by a game. Counterplay emerges through moments of coincidences, exploration, accidents and either positive, neutral, or negative attitudes. Counterplay can be absorbed by game companies, but the

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[17] Aarseth is not the only game scholar to discuss transgressive behavior in games. A more recent contribution to the topic*, Transgression in Games and Play* (eds. Jørgensen and Karlsen 2018) features a variety of articles on transgression in games and play from different research traditions. In *The Paradox of Transgression in Games* (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020) the authors examine gameplay as an aesthetic experience that has the power to diminish the sense of transgression. Another concept that resonates with transgressive play is "brink play" by Cindy Poremba (2007). Brink play refers to play that happens on the brink of reality, for example when real-life inappropriate acts are justified as "just a game" (ibid. 772–73).

phenomenon emerges from the actions of players. In this sense, it is constantly evolving and changing, today's rebellious practices can be mainstream tomorrow.

In my application of the concept, I have chosen to follow in the footsteps of Nakamura, Wirman and Apperley, and to see counterplay as potentially empowering and more importantly, as a tactic that can reveal and challenge power structures within games and gameplay. I will emphasize the rogue tactics suggested but shift the focus from succeeding or advancing in the game to challenging the logic of succeeding or advancing altogether. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5, counterplay can be not only ethical but necessary as well. Following Rosi Braidotti's nomad thinking, I want engage in critical yet affirmative politics and practices (Braidotti 2012, 13). I believe that approaching problematic structures through a critical, yet playful mindset leads to more interesting outcomes.[18]

2.4   Rhizomes, nomads and posthumans

This chapter is to define the broader theoretical framework outside of performance and game studies. I understand video games as material products, and through this materiality – including virtual and digital materiality – I have throughout this process tried to build an understanding of gameplay as a shared and situated practice.

Article I drew from Baruch Spinoza's writings as well as the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In addition to providing the philosophical groundwork for Article I, I mentioned theoreticians have also helped to define the philosophical tradition to work with. Baruch Spinoza is often called the philosopher of joy. In the beginning of this PhD journey, Spinoza's ideas provided me a theoretical frame to look at a world as unified. Spinoza's argument in a nutshell is that everything is made of the same substance and everything in the world is a manifestation of this substance (Spinoza 1994, 54, 145). What started as a 'Spinozian' project has since then zoomed in to more specific post-humanist discussions on especially materialities and the agencies of non-humans. Spinoza's influence (especially through Deleuze and Guattari) on many of my sources, is, however, undeniable.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) is at the core of the relationships that are formed through gameplay performances. Not only

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[18] See, for example, Bogad (2016).

through material processes (as demonstrated in Chapter 4), but also as the feelings of being connected through shared processes of becoming-something. As sort of grand wizards of continental philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have had an influence on my thinking, especially during the first years of my PhD process. From them comes the understanding of shared embodied knowledge production, which I believe has significantly influenced my research.

New materialism has been a sturdy background force throughout this process. The idea of not being alone in the world, humans that is, has shaped the practical parts as well as the theories I have turned to. Understanding the potential agencies of the Others, whoever they might be, is crucial in the Anthropocene. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010) political philosopher Kate Bennett discusses the role of matter in our lives, and how we should take the materiality and the agency of things such as electricity into account. During this process, it has become evident that it is not only human influence affecting performance, gameplay or even counterplay. When doing intermedial performances, the 'media' is always present. By this, I mean that when acknowledging any kind of media as a part of performance, one already accepts a certain type of non-human influence, non-human agency one might claim. The same goes for video games – there are already non-humans involved, whether they are acknowledged as a part of the process. I am not claiming that the mechanical or digital non-humans discussed here are conscious agents, but they do directly affect what happens.

The concept of nomadism especially affected Article I. The nomad acted as a possibility to locate myself in new situations and research fields. As a new, partly clueless scholar adapting an alter-ego, the nomad, allowed me to expand my thinking. Rosi Braidotti has used the nomad as a figuration of the post-subject: postmodern, postcolonial, postindustrial, and quite possibly posthuman as well. Nomad is an intersectional subject: it merges at the meeting point of several differentiating axles such as class, gender, race, and age. For Braidotti, the nomad is a mythical entity that allows for "blurring boundaries without burning bridges", to challenge settled and conventional thinking (Braidotti 1994, 4). The concept of nomadic originates from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who describe a smooth ontology as opposed to a striated, calculable one (Deleuze 1997; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). An example in the visual arts would be a figurative and an abstract line: a figurative line is based on "imitation and representation", and an abstract, nomadic line is "detached from the model of representation" (Žukauskaitė 2015, 12).

Posthumanism as theoretical stance has become increasingly important in the current planetarian situation. Posthumanism offers a frame for the project of destroying all the masterpieces, challenging the hierarchies of games and humans (Braidotti 2022; 2019; 2013). In addition to Braidotti Donna Haraway (2008; 1985) and her thoughts on cyborgs as well as on interspecies relations have been important. Haraway's thinking has broadened from a sort of techno feminism to interspecies feminism, and that correlates with my understanding of the nature of video games as well[19]. We should acknowledge the interspecies history of games and game devices, as well as the game event, both physical and virtual.

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[19] Haraway will not be discussed in depth in the thesis, as her work has been more of an inspiration to me personally than theoretical framework for this thesis.

3 METHODS AND MATERIAL

3.1 Methodologies

Methodologically this journey has not been a straightforward one. I started with an idea of representational analysis yet have ended up with practice as research entwined with ethnographic and autoethnographic strands, because I felt mere representational analysis would be enough to reach the performative side of video games. I also felt representation as a concept to be lacking in depth; video games as performative media are about much more than what is present at the visual surface level. I would say the methods have found me, or rather that the choice of research topics has defined the best methodological approach.[20]

3.1.1 (Auto)Ethnographies

As both my cases deal with experiences, ethnography and especially autoethnography serve as grounding practices for this thesis. I believe both performing and playing can be, if not best, at least especially profoundly understood by engaging in practice, both at the individual and the collective level. Ethnographic researcher aims to establish a holistic understanding of a particular group, and this is done by becoming an active member of said group. (Kramer and Adams 2017, 457)

Autoethnography offers information on particular experiences – in contrast to making empirical claims. It acknowledges the position of the researcher in the center of cultural and societal entanglements (Adams et al. 2015, 21–22). As these

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[20] Research focused on counterplay is about play, about the actions that happen in that specific moment of play, and thus the same material could not have been collected in any other way. For example, interviews or similar methodological choices could not have produced similar observations as the chosen hands-on approach.

wanderings were carried out as lonely performances, performative autoethnography as discussed by Tami Spry offers a valid viewpoint:

> Here, a performative-I autoethnography is grounded first and foremost in performativity, meaning it seeks to 1) identify fixed stereotyped categories of gender, race, class and other socially constructed performances, and 2) interrupts these performances with autoethnographies that critique homogenizing categories and the power structures that uphold them, and offer alternatives to dominant and often oppressive ways of being. The personal is inherently political in performance studies. (Spry 2016, 35)

David Graeber has argued that anthropology and ethnography could be the way to do anarchic research. Universities and academia tend be hierarchic and rigid, and – as I also do with Artaud – easily mix man and substance, as well as personify trails of thought. Graeber writes that practice of ethnography offers a rough model or suggestion of "nonvanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice" (Graeber 2004, 11). A researcher observes actual practices, and then tries to make sense of those practices and their possible hidden modes of logic. The radical intellectual should

> look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts. (*ibid.* 11)

This thought of offering research as ideas, as gifts back to the communities producing them is maybe somewhat idealistic and, in some ways, impossible, however, it is a worthy ethical guideline. My communities are already gone, as they mostly exist(ed) in the specific gameplay situations. But if we see community as a wider, looser assemblage, I would like to think that my research offers something back to all the transgressive players and pixels out there. First, my research takes marginal experiences and phenomena seriously as an object of research. Second, I believe the workshops offered new and interesting (learning) experiences for the participants – one student told me later, that they had started performing arts as a hobby after participating in the course.

3.1.2 Practice as research

The all-encompassing methodological choice in my work has been to label it as "practice as research". Baz Kershaw (2011) summarizes practice as research (or PaR) as using "practical creative processes as research methods (and methodologies) in their own right" (*ibid.,* 64), usually in research institutes. PaR can and often is artistic

research, but as my position is that of a theoretician, I would call my performances and workshops practice, but not specifically art. Kershaw formulates further:

> Hence practice as research in the performing arts pursues hybrid enquiries combining creative doing with reflexive being, thus fashioning freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies. (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, 64)

Thus, my practical experiments – solitary explorations and workshops – are not only material but also a crucial part of the process of knowledge production. For example, in *Minecraft,* experimenting with different modes of play offered me a location for thinking outside of the box – practical work preceded theoretical thinking. Doing something differently created a practice, and analysis of that practice opened possibilities for theoretical contribution.

3.1.3   Playing as research

Playing is considered by many scholars to be the best way to study games (Stenros 2015, 40). Although various aspects of games can be analyzed without playing them, the act of gameplay and the data it creates, as well as the data offered by the game, can be best accessed by actually playing the games discussed. Playing as research can thus be seen as a form of autoethnographic research. As with any such research, the researcher must take into consideration the pros and cons of being involved – or immersed – in the subject of research. However, as Stenros notes, "researchers gain more in insight than they lose in critical distance" (Stenros 2015, 42–43). How a researcher should play a game depends on the genre of the game and the research question. Some games, such as platformers, can be mastered technically; some – like tag or multiplayer matches – happen only once; some, such as infinite clicker games or *The Sims* (2000) saga, are more processes than finished artefacts.

Transgressive and unethical ways of playing can be studied as well, but can a researcher engage in such activities? As discussed in Chapter 2, counterplay can be seen as transgressive actions, but as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, that is only one side of the phenomenon. My stance is that ethical concerns about others – human and non-humans – are valid, but the feelings and rights of game corporations, for example, should not be in the first place, especially if we aim to construct ethical practices amidst players. By this I mean that producing critical analysis of these phenomena is more important than obeying all their rules. Stenros notes that only studying transgressive play with positive effects can lead to othering people

conducting "bad" transgressive play, and thus create one-sided research. Thus, all kinds of play should be studied and discussed (Stenros 2015, 46–47).

In this thesis, games as research objects are not understood as unchangeable objects, but rather as rhizomes, connections between physical and virtual entities. Thus, studying them is studying actions, connections, and entities around the game situation – the assemblage of it all. According to T.L. Taylor, when studying games, the researcher follows their gut feelings, often having an inkling of what they might find, and just as often are taken by surprise by what emerges from "the field".

> One of the tasks of the games researcher interested in the contextual nature of play—in its assemblage—is in exploring the everyday, the mundane, the "found objects" that construct it. (Taylor 2009, 333)

I understand the mundane, everyday objects, as the seemingly unimportant parts of any game environment – the pixel clusters that might be passed by as mere ornaments, but which are actually involved in the rhizome or assemblage of any game experience on a much deeper level. For example, any single block of any material in *Minecraft* is a crucial part of the virtual whole, as is any single pixel – they cannot be removed from the whole. These mundane details are crucial to my research and to my understanding of video games as a phenomenon: they form the rhizome of the gameplay experience.

3.2   Nomadic wanderings

The focus of this thesis emerged from my experiences of playing *Minecraft*. At that time, my theoretical interests had emphasis on certain materialist and posthumanist discourses described in Chapter 2.4, and these interests were very much reflected in these early explorations. Trying to figure out how playing video games could be transformative in terms of materialities, and human/non-human interaction led me on long walks within *Minecraft*. Observing the virtual environment and the NPC[21] lifeforms in it formed the beginning of my practice. I recorded my practical experiments by making handwritten notes and taking videos, pictures, and screenshots of the game.

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[21] Non-player character.

I started to think of me/my avatar as a nomad in that endless world. Virginia Woolf´s famous quote "I am rooted, but I flow" (1931, 64) began to describe my practice quite literally: my physical body was located firmly in its place, while my avatar body was moving through *Minecraft* swiftly, even sometimes gliding in the sky if I was playing with the creative mode on.[22] I was exploring both the physical and virtual aspects of gameplay, engaging in immersive experiences. This of course is a common experience for many players, but I aimed to focus on what happens outside the active gameplay to reach corporeal practice of immersive actions. What happens when the player chooses to remain unproductive, to stay passive next to the pixelated labor force of the game environment. It became clear that even if the player stands still, the game does not. Things happen everywhere around the player, and further from the player's reach and everywhere beyond the pixel horizon.

Nomadic wanderings turned into more specific tasks of nothingness. I started to explore how doing nothing would change the experience. As it turns out, doing nothing in a video game that is constantly inviting you to explore is indeed difficult. It is going against everything that the game has to offer. Even though *Minecraft* offers the player plenty of things to look at while standing still, the pull of something better around the corner is constant. This phenomenon is especially strong in video games such as *Minecraft* or other open world games or MMPORPGs, as there is no end to the game, there is always something to be found. But alas, it is never here, never now, it is always somewhere else in the near future. That 'it' is hard to define, it can be the next quest, the next treasure, the next beautiful spot or the next anything. The pull of adventure is undeniable.

These wandering practices established the base for my understanding of what performative counterplay could be and how it could possibly be reached. Throughout the workshops, I was looking for performances that could somehow capture the resistance in nothingness, to actively search for the smallest possible gesture to awaken discussions of doing otherwise. I have subsequently continued this quest in the analysis of the workshop performances.

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[22] In creative mode, the player has unlimited resources for building, there are no enemies or threats, and the player can move without being restricted by the laws of (*Minecraft*) physics.

3.3 Performing gameplay workshops

In my four published articles, I have used the material collected in two individual 'gameplay as performance' workshops I devised in Konstanz, Germany in May 2017 and Tampere, Finland from January to February of 2019. The workshops were not originally designed to produce material for my PhD project, but rather that happened as a side product of carrying out interesting performances during the classes.

3.3.1 Performing gameplay in Konstanz

I was asked to teach in Theoretical Media and Arts Studies Spring School in the University of Konstanz, Germany in Spring 2017. I was one of three teachers and had around eight hours of time at my disposal during that one-week period. These eight hours were divided into three sessions: one with theoretical content and two in which actual performances were created.

The course was aimed to give some insight into game studies for media studies students. At that time, University of Konstanz had no game-related teaching. The equipment needed for my class was gathered from the students and staff: people brought their laptops, consoles, and old monitors to the classroom. This also meant that the number of different games the students had at their disposal was limited. The groups all worked in the same space. Many of the students had no experience of gaming, although others were there as interested hobbyists.

As I did not intend to use the course as material for my thesis, I didn't collect consent forms form the students. However, I did later agree with the university that I am allowed discuss the course performances in my thesis, but I would not publish any picture or video material, and would make certain that the students would remain anonymous. I have chosen to discuss the Konstanz performances as works of groups, thus never singling out any individuals. Further, I have not – and this applies to the Tampere workshop as well – mentioned any details or characteristics of any performer to be able to assure their incognito status, and all the performances have been discussed as productions of groups, not individuals. The main material from the workshops are my own experiences, not those of the students.

Other teachers in the course had a more theoretical approach, while my teaching was more practical. In my first session, I gave a brief lecture about the concept of performance: I started with a traditional version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by Schaubühne Berlin, continued with video choreographer Jarkko Partanen's live art

piece *Fields of Glory Kuopio* (2015) and ended with a YouTube video featuring popular Finnish *Minecraft* YouTuber Wildeem. The aim was to clarify what I mean by performance and how to look at gameplay as performance. In *Hamlet,* actors were on a clearly defined stage in costumes performing a distinguished play; in *Fields of Glory Kuopio,* amateur performers created their warped interpretation of the Olympics in an empty stadium; and in Wildeem's video, which belongs to the 'let's play' genre, *Minecraft* characters were breaking out of jail. The examples moved from 'traditional' to new forms of performance: from the clear separation of the performers and spectators through live art to gameplay stream.

As performance was and still is understood as synonymous with theater by a lot of people, I found and still find it helpful to start these workshops by defining the concept of performance as a varied form of art.[23]

3.3.1.1   Performance assignments

During the first performance session, I asked the students to form groups and in groups, pick a game and "make a performance". I deliberately left the instructions vague, as I did not want to direct them too much towards any specific type of performance. As the previous examples of different types of performances demonstrated, various human and nonhuman elements could be utilized and intertwined. The choice in games was not big, as the students had all brought consoles and a couple of games. These games, played on consoles of different ages and brands were *LEGO Harry Potter 1-4* (2010), *Broforce* (2014), *Minecraft,* and *WWE 2K14* (2013) There was also one group in which the students used their laptops to play *Path of Exile* (2013). I made notes of the performances in this first session and decided to use my phone to record the ones made in the next session.

For the second performance session, I instructed the students to "think outside the box". In retrospect, this instruction was maybe a little too cryptic, but it led to some interesting performances, nonetheless. I would even argue that less information left more space for creativity, however that might not be the most

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[23] This applies still in 2022. I was a part of curatorial team for game art exhibition *Pelipoikilo* for the Kouvola Art Museum. I organized several tours to the exhibition with curator colleague Harold Hejazi. We approached the exhibition with the frame of gameplay as performance and were greeted with disbelief that these concepts could be somehow joined. It appeared that "gameplay as performance" was new to both gamers who didn't see their play experiences as art, and for the regular museum attendees, who, for the first time, encountered the idea that games could be art at all.

pedagogically sound approach.[24] I wanted to induce counterplay, and some resistance towards traditional theater-style performance, but I did not want to ask for it. I asked them to use the same games as in the previous task. Partly, this was because the game selection was limited, but I did also think learning a new game might shift the focus away from the actual task. All the groups changed their perspective for the second performance. One group had some experience in making more 'artistic' assignments, and even told me they knew what I was expecting from them. That emphasized the teacher-student relationship: even when I pressed that their input could be anything imaginable, some of them thought of a correct answer that would please me, would exist somewhere in the universe of possible performances.[25] What was noticeable was the willingness to be present as performers and to rethink the importance of the game itself. This led me to be believe there is something in gameplay as performance that can offer collective places of renegotiating the relationship between games and players.

Even if I did not place any significance on the actual titles, contents, or other specifics of the games students chose or were forced to choose, they definitely affected the performances that were created. The games were then relatively new but have until now aged significantly. This affects the affordances games give, as well as visual assemblages that were possible. Further, all the games were relatively known titles that were popular in a European context. The same applies to the workshop in Tampere, although there was more variety among the games chosen there.

The performances made in the Konstanz workshop got me thinking that this sort of playful, performative approach to games might be deeper and more important than I had thought previously. Following T.L. Taylor (2009), I followed my gut but was still taken by surprise: the workshop of the mundane, seemingly unimportant details formed new contexts and new assemblages that offered different views on what gameplay as performance could be and what sort of new meanings it could reach. The students transformed game elements by re-contextualizing them through the frame of performance. I felt there was some revolutionary potential in these sorts of practices, and I wanted to investigate it further.

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[24] I have since completed my university pedagogy studies.

[25] To be honest, this is somewhat true. As a researcher interested in certain phenomena, I am obviously more excited about certain types of performance, certain ideas, and certain contexts. Thus, in that sense, there were hidden 'correct' answers to be found, however the interesting things were mostly found without being looked for.

3.3.2 Performing gameplay in Tampere

I decided to do another course, and this time plan the assignments more carefully. In Spring 2018, I studied an introductory course on university pedagogy. Part of this course was to develop a new course for university students. I used this chance to develop my initial idea into a more formal and structured course module. In Fall 2018, I offered the course to the Internet and Game Studies program at Tampere University. My proposition was accepted, and the course was scheduled for Spring 2019. It was organized as a voluntary course in the master's degree program in Internet and Game Studies. I collected consent forms from the students at the end of the course. We agreed together that I can discuss their performances in my thesis, but the students will remain anonymous, no screenshots of their performances will be published, and I will delete all collected videos once the research is completed. All of the performances were recorded on video, and I made notes of the discussions we had after each performance. All the video recordings of the performances in both workshops have been saved to my password protected university-provided personal computer and will be destroyed at the completion of this thesis.

The course was then organized to take place from January to February 2019. It consisted of five four-hour sessions. The sessions were mainly group work, and the students were given reading material before the sessions. The material was chosen to support the theme of each session. We had several rooms and several consoles and PCs at our disposal, as well as countless games from various decades to choose from. This meant that students had more space to think and practice. My experience from Konstanz had taught me that repeating the assignments and offering enough time and easy access to the material, here games, was crucial. Stressing the absence of correct answers and choices, and emphasizing creative freedom allowed the students to – once again thinking of the rhizomatic nature of games, gameplay, and performance – focus on the unexpected. The students came mainly from game studies, and were thus familiar with playing, but not so much with performing. There were a couple of students who had some background in theater, and, on the other hand, some who quit the course after the first session, as they had understood "performance" to refer to technical performance of video games.

The first session was an introductory one with focus on performance theory. The following four sessions all had the same outline. First, I gave the students the day's assignment and then they had about an hour-and-a-half to work on it in their groups. After that, the work was presented to the course attendees, and each performance was followed by a vivid discussion. I decided not to instruct them to counterplay or

break the rules, as I felt this might direct their focus to a certain, possibly narrow area. However, the last session was an exception: to evoke unconventional, creative, and critical thinking, I instructed them specifically to break the rules.

Much like in Konstanz, the focus of the introductory session was on the concept of performance and gameplay as performance. The students also did some basic performance analysis based on Patrice Pavis's theater analysis questionnaire (Pavis 1985). Among the other reading material was Willmar Sauter's *The Theatrical Event* (2000). I first showed three versions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The first was a more traditional stage adaptation with strong focus on Shakespeare's text and actor Benedict Cumberbatch's interpretation of it; the second was a contemporary dance version; and the third was a *Minecraft* machinima. The last example was riding video from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). We discussed the performance quality of each example, trying to figure out where and how the performance happened – whether it was embedded in the narrative, the animation, or perhaps in the act of gameplay itself. The students saw the examples that dealt with video games to be closer to movies than to theater – and for example in the case of machinima this is accurate, as the location of the spectator is defined differently than in a theatrical performance. Further, they were able to identify the transition from (talented) actor(s) to virtual, rather arbitrary performers.

In the end of the first session of 24 students present was divided into six groups. We were to borrow the consoles and games from the collaborative classroom space Oasis,[26] and to simplify the process every group was to have a keymaster in their ranks.[27] Other members were picked by a simple one-two-three selection method. I asked the themes to come up with a name for themselves, mostly so that I would keep track of their performances during the course. The groups were called: 'Not in Moodle', 'LUIGI'S', 'KÄÄMIT', 'TIIMSIKS', 'Wimbledon Tennismatch', and 'Cool Team'. Whilst making the second performance, two groups - LUIGI'S and KÄÄMIT – merged, and thus, there were five performances per session.

The following will introduce the four assignments given to the students. I will not go into detail about the performances produced, as not all performances were relevant to the topic of this thesis. I will, however, discuss some of the performances

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[26] Oasis is a social space which is used for studying, events and gaming.

[27] Keymaster is a person, usually student, responsible for maintaining Oasis. Students gain credits for taking on this duty.

in my articles, and some will be discussed in the following chapters. For now, it is sufficient to explain the guidelines that defined those performances. I will also mention the games used in all performances to set the mise-en-scene of each session.

3.3.2.1   The first assignment

The first assignment was meant to be a rehearsal of what it means to do a performance with video games in general. Most of the students did not have any theater or other performance background, and the ones who did were from a more traditional theater scene. This variance in the students' backgrounds has been beneficial in the analysis of the material, as the results talk more about the concept of performance than the students' expectations of producing 'art', like the artistically oriented group in the Konstanz workshop. The reading material consisted of three texts: Clara Fernández-Vara*'s Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance* (2009)*;* and chapters from Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (2018) and Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies – An Introduction* (2013). The material was meant to deepen the understanding of performance and video games as performance.

The assignment was the following:

>Create a performance!
>- Adaptation or reimagination of a classic
>   - Medium of the classic doesn't matter
>- Action takes place inside the video game
>- Beginning, middle and end
>   - Some sort of story structure
>- Duration 4-7 minutes[28]

After these instructions, I gave them approximately 90 minutes to come up with a performance. I specified that the nature and the medium of the classic was theirs to decide, and the only thing that was expected was that they use a video game to bring this performance into existence.

The finished performances included three versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), two performed with *FIFA 2019* (2018) and one with

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[28] This somewhat arbitrary duration was my way of asking for five minutes but trying to be flexible at the same time.

LittleBigPlanet (2008); *The Bible* performed with a board game called *Risk* (1957); *Fight Club* (1999) with *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002); and *Rocky* (1976) movies from one to four performed with *Street Fighter* (1987).

Altogether, the performances of the first day were fairly conventional in the sense that a spoken, clear narrative was the aim in almost all of them. The classics were not so much re-imagined, but more transferred to a different medium. Counterplay was present in most of them, but more in the sense of being forced to do something other than play the game. Many of the performances were built on the actual game play, and the performative elements were sort of added on top of this. The notion of performing was still a little odd, as in many of the performances the performers themselves were sort of beside the performance: for example, playing the game next to the screen, but trying to minimize themselves as part of the performance by body language, positioning, and narrative. The gaze was directed to the screen, not to human performers.

3.3.2.2   The second assignment

For the second performance, I hoped the students would move further from traditional human-centered thinking of performance. The reading material for this session was Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (Laurel 1991). As an additional reading for the Finnish-speaking students, I offered my article "Koe kesyttämätön – Inhimillinen ja ei-inhimillinen yhteistoimijuus videopeleissä" (Huuhka 2016) ("Experience the Wild – Human and non-human co-agency in video games"), which was published by the Finnish Theatre Research Society in 2016. This article was my first venture into non-human agencies. It discussed my experiences in *Minecraft,* and was preliminary work for Article I.

The instructions were the following:

> Create a performance!
> - Non-human performers in the focus
>   - Further: the performers should not be anthropomorphic
> - You are allowed ONE supporting human or human shaped performer
> - No human produced speech allowed
> - Duration 3-5 minutes
> - Random topics!

The focus of the assignment was to search for performers outside the human form. An easy alternative, when the human form is out of selection, would have been to

look for anthropomorphic animal or object characters, such as Sonic the Hedgehog or Mario. Human-produced speech was also off the list, but to my surprise, no group decided to use any robotic voice generators or similar things. To help the teams get started, I gave all the groups two random words – or in some cases, topics – from a random word generator.

I will now list the games used in the performances alongside those random words. 'Disney movies' and 'spinning' inspired a performance with *Everything* (2017); 'North Africa' and 'elephants' with *Civilization V* (2010); 'murder' and 'water sports' with *Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future* (2000); 'music' and 'bridge' was performed with the Internet version of the card game bridge; and 'banking' and 'football' was paired with a game in which the player collected coins by throwing a small ball.[29]

My first observation was that many of the groups were struggling with the hidden rule that a performance must contain a clear narrative, a storyline recognizable to the audience. This proved problematic combined with non-anthropomorphic characters. In other words, the students had difficulty imagining what a performance without such characters could be like, what could happen and what could make it happen. The session ended with rather heated discussion about the quality of performances, and whether that was purely a subjective experience for each separate audience member. Further, the acknowledgment of the non-human was at times difficult, as the groups focused on the other human members of the class and not the non-human elements performing.

3.3.2.3   The third assignment

The aim of the third assignment was to deepen the students' knowledge and experience of 'the Other' in video games. In other words, the assignment was designed to encourage the students to explore the nature of the nonhuman more freely in the case of the video games. The reading material offered for this session was twofold: first, I offered a more complex definition of performance through the introduction of Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (2001). The second material was an introduction to new materialism through a chapter of Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* (2010). The last article was a combination of the fields: Philip Auslander's "Life from

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[29] Unfortunately, the name of this game has been lost in the process.

Cyberspace" (2002), in which he discusses the liveness of online conversation bots. I also offered them Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) as extra reading.

Before giving the actual assignment, I introduced the targeted audience of the days' performances. I introduced a picture of a pixel cluster as a representation of a target audience. I emphasized that I did not mean especially this specific assemblage of pixels, but rather any pixels in any possible formations. The instructions were the following:

> Create a performance!
> - Pixel cluster as the targeted audience
>   - The topic, the form, the visuals
> - Video games (all the definitions) and consoles/devices as medium/co-agents
>   - Special focus on the materiality of the medium
> - One (or more) unrelated thing that affects the performance
>   - Utilize the environment, things around you
>   - Who or what is able to perform?

The instructions suggested that both the performer and the audience can be, at least partly, located beyond the human experience. The students were invited to create sensations for the presumed senses of the pixels. All of the performances did reflect on this aspect to some extent.

When the audience was imagined to be virtual and abstract, the performances became more connected to the human physical world. Each of the performances took a step back from the screen and included physical elements from the surroundings. The human performers also became much more present in the performances: during the previous exercises, the humans had been, in some regard, beside the performance. They had a quality of invisible puppeteers in them: the humans were present, but existing towards the game and towards the screen. This time, the relationship was directed more to us humans, and I think this happened because of the imagined pixel audience. The performers had to take that audience into account, and as a byproduct, this acknowledgement spread to include the human audience.

3.3.2.4 The fourth assignment

The last assignment was meant to provoke some more straightforward counterplay. Unlike during the previous sessions, I asked the students to choose the game before

receiving the instructions. They chose *Bloodborne* (2015)*, Grand Theft Auto V* (2013)*, Goat Simulator* (2014)*, Gang Beasts* (2017)*,* and *Super Mario Kart* (1992)*.*

The instructions were:

- Break the rules! Both physical and those of the game!
  - Figure them out and seek to smash them
  - Search for weird stuff, failures and losers
- Break conventions of game play and traditional theatre!
  - In relation to spectator and performer, player, and character, etc.
- Otherwise, anything goes
- Duration 3–5 minutes
- Name your performance

I had given Nakamura's and Wirman's 'Girlish Counterplay Tactics' as the material for this session, and the performances reflected this. In comparison to the Konstanz workshop, more obvious, tested counterplay tactics were used in these performances. The outline of instructions remained similar throughout all the assignments. The idea was that if the basic outline is familiar, there would be more time for creativity, for focusing on content instead of form. This seems to have worked, as towards the end of the course, especially during this fourth assignment, the students seemed to be more confident with this specific performance concept, as well as with performing for others.

Social rules were broken by criticizing the others' playstyle, by giving unsolicited advice, or by not paying any attention to the game. In one performance, the screen was touched – this even caused a little commotion in the audience: it was a rule that affected us even when it happened during the performance. The games were also played 'wrong': they were played backwards, without violence, by letting the game play itself or by using the game as a machinima stage.

There was a visible shift towards the humans as performers here. Compared to the previous sessions, the humans and their actions became more important to those performances. This could have happened for many reasons, for example, because the human performers were now more eager to be in the spotlight, as they were getting more comfortable on stage. Another possibility is that the human performers felt that the nonhumans could not produce a performance that went against the rules 'enough': after all, games and devices operate with stricter rulesets than humans.

3.3.3 The workshops in summary

Looking back, both workshops worked well within the time and resources we had. If I were to do them again, I would be more precise with the instructions and open the background of my research more with the participants. This would support more profound understanding of the subjects studied during the classes. Overall, working together with students has enabled me to build my theoretical foundation and refine my practice. The workshops are a crucial part of the process of knowledge production. They offered me glimpses of possible counterplay, gameplay, and performance practices I would not have thought of otherwise. Most of the conceptual and theoretical ideas presented in this thesis have been born of watching the performances in these workshops.

In the future, I would like to continue developing these workshops. I do believe that this type of interdisciplinary practice benefits both artists and researchers in both fields. Playing as a form of resistance is the future, and developing tactics to emphasize this development is important.

4 FINDINGS FROM THE ARTICLES: THREE THEMES

This chapter will go through the articles included in this thesis, and in the process, will emphasize their findings. Each of the articles had a specific focus ranging from video games as performance to anarchic counterplay. This structure allowed me to develop my theoretical views on counterplay as well as build new perspectives on video games and performances. In this chapter, I will go through three themes that arose from them: video games as performance, non-human agencies in video game performances, and performance as counterplay (see Table 1). Together these themes will form the basis for the theory of anarchic, performative counterplay, which I will discuss in Chapter 5.

	Article I	Article II	Article III	Article IV
Video games as performance	X	X	X	X
Non-human agencies	X		X	
Performance as counterplay	X		X	X

Table 1.   Overview of the themes discussed in the articles.

4.1 Theme one: video games as performance

Throughout this journey, the question of whether video games are performance has been relevant. These two forms of art, media and entertainment have been linked together: there has been, for example, discussions of LARPs and RPGs as a form of performance (Hoover et al. 2018; Stenros et al. 2010), representations of different groups of people or animals (e.g., Malkowski & Russworm 2017; Šisler 2008; Bogost 2008; Tyler 2022) and discussions of people playing video games in a performative fashion (Fernández-Vara 2009; Westecott 2009). One thing I felt missing was the performative element of gameplay itself. For me, this has been less technical and more conceptual: what happens when we think of playing video games as a mode of performing? How does the frame of performance affect gameplay?

4.1.1 Video games as performative media

As I started to go through the workshops, I found that there was a lack of research concerning the similarities between video games and gameplay as performance, and more in general use of video games in performance. To cover this gap, I wrote Article II "Playing is Performing: Video Games as Performance" (2020), in which I suggest five approaches for discussing video games as performance and parts of performance. These approaches were: *video games as an aesthetic resource*, *video games as a structural category*, *performances staged inside video games*, *performances made with video games*, and *gameplay as performance*.

I wanted to create a categorization for analyzing video games as performance or parts of performance. It was clear that video games were used variedly in the field of performing arts, and performances were being made inside video games as well. My aim was to simplify the analytical discussion, to introduce basic concepts upon which the discussion could then be founded.

Video games as an aesthetic resource means the use of video games as props, set design or symbolic gestures in performances. Video games can represent a specific era, specific characteristics, cultural localizations or be purely aesthetical (*ibid.* 69-70). This could be, for example, characters of a play playing a certain game to refer to a certain decade, or use of fighting sounds from an action game to show violence on stage.

Video games as a structural category (of performance) refers to immersive theater and other immersive performance experiences. The performers and the audience have the possibility to affect the narrative of the performance through their actions and choices. Immersive and interactive performances are related to LARPs, and they offer the audience the possibility to experience the fictional reality differently from the so-called traditional theater (*ibid.* 70-71). A great example of an immersive performance is *Operation Black Antler* by Blast Theory (2016). In *Operation Black Antler,* spectators played undercover agents infiltrating a rightwing extremist group.

The third category, *performances staged inside video games,* refers to any performance events held inside video game worlds, such as concerts or actual theater plays. This category does not automatically involve all roleplay that often happens in RPGs, but that can certainly be seen every so often as a staged performance. Common characteristic in these types of performances is the shared understanding of the performance and the performance space (*ibid.* 71-72). This includes concerts staged

in video game environments – like Marshmello in *Fortnite* (2017) – or other artistic performances players stage in, for example, MMORPGs.

Performances made with video games refers to performances made with video game(s) as the main medium and/or as performers. Here the game is no longer a prop or aesthetic resource, but in the center of the performance. Human performers act alongside machinic and pixelated performers in a space of performance that is located somewhere between virtual and physical. Further, video games are used in a manner that has little to do with actual gameplay (*ibid.* 72-73). A lot of the performances in the workshops of Konstanz and Tampere were in this category.

Lastly, *gameplay as performance* shifts the attention to gameplay as an artistic process. For my research, this category offers the most interesting possibilities of thinking of video games as performances, and further, thinking about performance in a new way. I have strived throughout this process to challenge both fields of art. My claim is that looking at gameplay as performance changes how we perceive and make sense of individual actions (Huuhka 2024, 3). By shifting our gaze from the representational level towards the material and virtual level, i.e., rhizomes and processes, we can access embodied experiences.

Gameplay as performance requires the abandonment of representational thinking. Virtual environments, landscapes and things should be seen as what they actually are: virtual entities, assemblages of pixels and fractions of code. I have pointed out that, for example, the fictional world of *Minecraft* is not a representation of the actual landscapes existing within our world, but rather a virtual world with its own laws of physics, time system and aesthetic composure. As the player moves in the environment, in this example in the world of *Minecraft*, they do so by engaging with the game device. What the player does is not representational: they move buttons and sticks with their fingers.[30] The movements of the players' hands do not correspond with the movements of the character. The actions seen in the game may resemble something for 'our' physical world, but they are actions of the virtual world. The representational connection happens at the narrative level, not the physical level (*ibid.* 74).

Thus, concentrating the focus beyond the narrative aspect to purely physical and virtual phenomena, opens up a new world: things in the game may be familiar, but

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[30] VR games and other motion capture-based games and devices are an exception, even though the representational quality of the gestures can be varied.

they are no longer representational. Virtual entities are not shadows of 'our' world, but they exist as themselves. Here, performance shows its transformative power: gameplay as performance happens when the player chooses to abandon the objectives and narratives – a new way of playing emerges, gameplay as an action is transformed into something similar, yet different (*ibid.* 74). In Article I (Huuhka 2019), I had already started to discuss the importance of diving beyond representational levels while playing/performing, and emphasizing the materialist nature of gameplay performance (*ibid.* 221). Thus, the importance of abandoning representation has been crucial throughout this process.

Creating this taxonomy helped me to identify what was happening under the surface level of the performances of my research material. Especially the analysis of the performances made in the workshops benefit from this categorization, as it is now easier to distinguish performances 'just' made with video games from those that are gameplay performance. The latter is also the realm where anarchic, performative counterplay takes place.

4.1.2   Spectatorship in video game performances

The place of the spectator, if there even is an audience to begin with, has been in constant change throughout this process. In my first experiments, I relied on the concept of first-person audience (Sandberg 2004). The concept has been used in LARP research to describe the way every participant and player is at the same time responsible for creating the fictional world as well as observing it (*ibid.* 274-277). This approach resonates with especially solo game performances, as the player-performer is in the center of the experience, both as creator and spectator. Even though there was always only one human present, I have acknowledged, from the beginning, the importance of non-humans as co-creators, performers and spectators as well (Huuhka 2019). Thus, there were others spectating me – and themselves, as the position of a non-human entity inside a video game, is much the same as the players: simultaneously creating and witnessing the performance.

In the workshops the place and space of the audience seemed at first to be more easily defined. Performances were created by humans, and other humans then watched those performances. However, actual performances scattered both the spaces of performership and spectatorship between various human and nonhuman bodies and positions. Especially in the first performances in each workshop, there were instances where the human performers were sort of beside the performance,

and the actual performance happened purely on the screen while the intended audience watched the screen beside the players. In other words, the situation resembled a more traditional way of watching gameplay, where the performers/players were not meant to be the central focus. This setting later turned around as the performers took on more visible positions and the stage expanded beyond the screen. During the second assignment in Konstanz, a team created a stage setting, where they as performers, were in a (movie) theater watching the game perform a film for them. Thus, we as the audience were spectating another audience spectating live cinema (Huuhka 2021, 21).

To conclude: the position of the spectator was fluid throughout the process. What remained the same was the varied materiality of the spectators, as I felt it was important to acknowledge the materiality of the medium. A lot can and has been argued against the possibility of non-human agencies in video games (e.g., Keever 2022), but I believe that leaving windows and doors open for possibilities of otherness can, even if purely speculative, reveal something important about ourselves as humans. The next subchapter will focus more on the place of the non-human in video game performance.

4.2   Theme two: non-human agencies (or their absence)

Throughout this process, I have understood gameplay as "material activity created through and in the bodies of my human and nonhuman peers and myself", those bodies being all physical, though not all – such as code or electricity – are reachable with common human senses (Huuhka 2019, 221). The rhizome of gameplay involves a vast number of humans and non-humans: designers, machines, players, pixels, and algorithms, to name a few. In Article I, this rhizomic coexistence was framed by Spinoza's idea of all things being embodiments of the same divine matter, and thus humans being inseparable from other entities (Spinoza 1994, 45,145). This aspiration for the destruction of hierarchies does not mean that I as a player would or could be free of them, after all, the whole gameplay event happens on my terms, but nevertheless, deconstruction of human dominance should be aimed for (Huuhka 2019, 222).

To strengthen Spinoza's argument, I have borrowed the concept of *vibrant matter* from Jane Bennett (2010). Bennett argues that all our actions are affected by nonhuman forces, even though we tend to dismiss other materialities and overemphasize our own influence and liability (*ibid.* xii). Further, I have utilized the

concept of *rhizome* from Deleuze and Guattari. Rhizome describes a method of organization – whereby all the points (entities) can be connected to all the others, and everything happens within the connections. The fate of any single point is meaningless in the big picture, and therefore a rhizome as a model of organization fits well into gameplay experiences (Deleuze 1992, 27–30).

T.L. Taylor has applied the concept of assemblage (rhizome) to game studies. They write that the assemblage of games and gameplay are constructed out of the interrelations of technologies, the material world, virtual spaces, social relations and their emergent practices, aesthetic experiences, institutional structures, cultural connotations and so on. Our interpretation of the finished game product is built upon our understanding of the preceding (Taylor 2009, 332). Taylor's thought emphasizes the fact that games as such are not separate from the rest of the world – thus gameplay as an action is inherently connected to the world. Seth Giddings, drawing from Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory has argued that playing with games and machines can be looked at as engagements with artificial intelligence (Giddings 2005) – there are thus various entities present in those moments. Vicki Williams has written that even though games have their anticipated offerings of agency, surprising agencies emerge when the player and the system interact in unanticipated ways (Williams 2019, 47). Sonia Fizek has suggested the concept of "play at a distance or dis-play" to describe a practice of distancing oneself from play and delegating the agency to the machine, and "to dis-play is to participate as one of the other possible agents in a distributed algorithmic entanglement", to change the focus from human to other agents (Fizek 2022, xvii).

I see that gameplay as an action is constructed in cooperation with humans and nonhumans, and it is "essentially materialistic, rhizomatic, and mimetic" (Huuhka 2019, 224). Human actions are thus always constructed in cooperation, and the assemblages they are involved in reach far beyond the borders of the game: The acts conducted in-game resonate off-game into and through my body, in the electric wires, and so on, forever (*ibid.* 224–225). The gameplay event is thus a little dot in space and time, and far from being something separate from the rest of the world.

My understanding of the rhizome of gameplay has allowed me to proceed somehow horizontally through my research material as well as my theoretical landscape. By this I mean to express that no one game, no one theory nor one specific performance has any special hierarchy in this process. When it comes to all the games discussed or used as an example, they are presented as purely material (and virtual) entities that operate as part of this rhizomatic experiment. This also

means that I do not want to engage with previous analysis of individual games. It is clear however, that certain games carry certain meanings, and this was visible especially in exercises in counterplay. Cultural meanings and hegemonic positions do invite resistance, and this was obvious in the performances put on by the students. As becomes evident, my wonderings in *Minecraft* were against a certain logic of the game, not the game itself.

In many ways, discussing nonhuman agencies risks the danger of anthropomorphism, but I have tried to steer clear of giving my cooperators agential powers they do not possess, and especially urges or motives that might somehow reflect those that I myself or other human players might have. For example, I have discussed errors, bugs and glitches as moments of potential nonhuman performership and agency (Huuhka 2018). This is, however, a purely performative viewpoint: I do not think that their aim (whoever THEY are) would be to disturb my game experience, but rather that unexpected things create new relations and power structures and dismantle others.

We are increasingly guided, perhaps even herded, by algorithms in our everyday choices and chores (e.g., Bogert et al. 2021; Hosanagar 2019). There has been a lot of discussion of the agency of the non-human in video games and in virtual and algorithmic circumstances. Whether or not algorithms and AI systems do actually have genuine agency can and should be debated, but from a performance studies perspective, we can assume that they do. It can even be stated that they do have performative power and agency: they transfer words into action, into reality.

The agency of the non-human performer has been discussed in the field of puppet theater, or object theater to approach a more contemporary and encompassed edge (Kirkkopelto 2017; Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014; R. Allen 2016). Non-human performativity has also been discussed in relation to site-specific performance (e.g., Donald 2014).

Throughout this process, I have considered non-humans of different materialities as my peers and co-performers. In the early stages of this process, I emphasized the cocreation of the gameplay experience and especially in the case of *Minecraft,* the cocreation of the game world itself. In *Minecraft,* the gameworld is generated as the player advances in it, so it only comes into existence as the player gives the command with their movement, which the algorithms and code then comply with. In my article, I formulated it as a "shared activity between the player and other elements and agents, such as pixels, algorithms, and game developers" (Huuhka 2019, 218). I wish

to clarify that even when I am referring to nonhuman agencies, I do not try to suggest that they operate alone or without human input in some or any stages of their existence. As we operate in the field of performance research, the position of the player is that of a performer as well as a spectator, thus the non-humans and their actions are perceived through the experiences of player-performers. From that point of view, it is not important how original, authentic, or independent nonhumans are – their actions are perceived and interpreted as they appear as parts of the process.[31]

In the Konstanz workshop, one performance transformed completely as unintended action by the code/algorithm/game took over. The performance was built around a PS4 controller, which was manipulated by a rubber band to keep playing by itself. The character in *Broforce* ran forward just to be killed, and then repeatedly returned to the beginning to start the cycle all over again. However, during the performance, the character got stuck against a wall and as the controller was fixed on one position, nothing else happened. The human performers did not know what to do, as they had relied on the performership and agency of the controller (Huuhka 2021, 21). The game itself hijacked the performance, thus showing a bit of its hidden potential for agency. In this performance, counterplay happened on two levels: the first was the approach of the human performers to the controller and the second was the response of the game itself. As mentioned before, the agency of the video game and its components can be challenged, but in the context of that specific performance, it did exist. The agency of the game was clear to us in the audience and even more for the human performers, who lost control of the performance.

As introduced in Chapter 3, the third assignment in the Tampere workshop was to make a performance for a cluster of pixels. This assignment was an exploration into the possibility of reaching the realm of the non-humans of gameplay. I observed that focusing on the nonhumans as an audience guided the performances away from a theater-like performance style towards more experimental forms (Huuhka 2021, 22). The students were trying to figure out what would be interesting or enjoyable to pixels to see, and there were two main themes that emerged from those

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[31] There are some genres of games where the game itself – the non-human – is the intended player. For example, idle games – or passive, self-playing, or clicker games – and zero-player games are designed be mostly played by the AI, making the human players participation optional or even completely unnecessary. However, even though being interesting genres of games, they fall out of the scope of this thesis, as the idleness and the uselessness of the human player and thus the non-human agency are part of the game design. For more on idle games see Fizek 2018 and Sebastian 2016 ,and on zero-player games Björk and Juul 2012.

performances. Many of the performances had the game as a place of the pixel audience, and the performance then happened within the physical world. The students argued that the pixels would probably enjoy watching something else than themselves or others like them, and thus the performers and props were mostly material things. Second, the students felt that as the pixels have to continuously perform for us, it would be nice to perform for them in exchange (*ibid.* 22). In one of the performances the performers told that this specific showing was for us humans, but there were some "VIP pixels" (drawn on the whiteboard) also in the audience.

In one of the performances, the human performers had built a wall from fabric-covered seat blocks and some type of fabric netting between the performance space and the space allocated for the human audience. The intended audience, the pixels, existed on a screen hidden from the eyes of the human audience. On another screen, also hidden, human performers played some purposefully unrecognizable 8-bit game, while music from another 8-bit game provided a relaxing – at least for the pixels – atmosphere. The performance shut us other humans out and focused solely on the pixel audience and their assumed preferences. This concept was interesting, and it differed from the others as the unwritten rule of the classroom – that everyone should see everything – was broken (*ibid.* 22-23).

The prior examples show that somehow the performances revolving around nonhuman agency managed to push into the realm of performance as counterplay. Focusing beyond human potential brought forth other potentialities, or at least imaginations of them.

4.3   Theme three: acts of doing against – performative counterplay in practice

Most easily accessible video games, as well as any cultural products, come from a certain place of hegemony. Anything that is easily downloadable has already gone through a process of being accepted, and while small developers also have the possibility to get their games published in some bigger platform, most content comes from bigger companies operating within the consumerist system. Smaller is not obviously better: most indie game developers and companies also wish to make money – their workers' living included – with their games, as that is how these systems of power and money operate. As discussed in Chapter 2, game companies tend to monetize players' inventions and counterplay practices. The practices

presented in this chapter are probably beyond any market value, at least in ways imaginable today.

In Article I, I discussed Pasi Väliaho's claim that video games offer a platform for the production of neoliberal subjects. Through immersion, for example, in first person shooter games, our brain learns to adapt and to anticipate:

> the screen exists as a simulated future, capturing our bodily rhythms and prenoetic adjustments through which the affective and predictive functions of the brain merge with the video screen and vice versa. (Väliaho 2014, 41)

Performative counterplay is set against anticipation and expected actions and can thus be seen as a possibility to challenge these deeper biotechnical tendencies.

4.3.1   Private counterplay – challenging the system solo

As mentioned in Chapter 3, this process started with my solo experiments in *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is a highly immersive video game that lures the player in with the constant pull of the adventure – as everything is created in the process, the player can never know what lies beyond the next mountain or valley. It caters to the desire for exploration, which can be seen as colonial: players tend to want to leave their mark in their surroundings to express their presence to other players or even just to the environment (Huuhka 2019, 219). This was my play experience as well: I wandered around building, cutting, mining, digging, and fighting with great pleasure. My entry point to counterplay in *Minecraft* was thus that of an invested and immersed player. As mentioned in Chapter 3, my methodological approach came from performative autoethnographic research (Spry 2016). My aim was to unearth fixed categories of behavior offered by the game, and offer new perspectives through my artistic, practice-based approach.

As all gameplay is restricted by the physical and virtual restrictions of the code, I became interested in the reactions that happen within the player during gameplay. I started to pay attention to the feelings and bodily sensations of the player while engaging in counterplay. These processes that happen within the player are not bound by the restrictions of the game, algorithm, or code: they are unhinged, gratuitous, unlimited, nothing and everything at the same time. They are formed from the material relationships between my body, the controller, the space I play in, the virtual space, my feelings, my actions, or my immobility. Counterplay can happen while just staying immersed and immobile inside the virtual world for extended

periods of time. Even if the player does nothing, the experience can be intense and active. I called this type of counterplay "journeys in intensity" to express the simultaneous action and inaction (*ibid.* 230). This sort of counterplay might seem unimpressive in comparison to other more transgressive modes, but it operates on a different logic than other forms of counterplay. It focuses on the performative aspects of the player and the game world, where they create something new while refusing to expect the stimuli the game is willing to offer. Here is the radical, revolutionary potential: refusal to play is, if ever so briefly, to refuse the production of neoliberal subjectivity (*ibid.* 230).

To situate myself I chose to perform the role of the *nomad*. In the work of Rosi Braidotti, nomadism describes a certain critical consciousness that defies social modes of behavior and thought (Braidotti 1994, 5). Nomadism allows for creative becoming – some things through the practice of 'as if': it is "a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (*ibid.* 6). I have taken this attitude from Braidotti and strived to offer my loyalty not to 'games' but to the rhizome of the gameplay. Nomadic counterplay practice is a philosophical rather than operational practice, and thus paves new approaches to counterplay in game studies (Huuhka 2019, 231).

The actual counterplay practices were *wandering around aimlessly* and *remaining in immobility*. As *Minecraft* invites the player to build and establish settlements, wandering around without building anything was my first practical experiment. I started the game on the easiest mode possible, and therefore had no fear of enemies nor hunger. This creates a play mode where the player is required to do absolutely nothing to survive. As the player continues their never-ending journey through the world, they must leave behind all kinds of interesting things and occurrences that invite them to leave some trace of their presence in that specific moment in space and time. Resisting the colonial urge leads to acceptance of absence of power, which is a radical outcome of counterplay. This resistance is also present in the practice of remaining in immobility. The idea is that the player spawns to the world as an avatar, and then just remains immobile. Nothing is achieved, yet a lot is still happening in the player and in the virtuality around the avatar while we both engage in "active nothingness". These practices are against the colonialist logic of the game as the player actively resists all offered objectives. Like all counterplay practices, these are made possible by the game, yet they cannot be monetized as there is no added value available (Huuhka 2019, 231–32).

Concluding my nomadic explorations in *Minecraft* established a philosophical and artistic practice of counterplay that actively resists the colonialist position offered to the player/avatar. It extends beyond the gameplay event, as it offers the player possibilities to acknowledge their own position in different material and virtual hierarchies and thus make the choice to reconstruct them (Huuhka 2019, 233).

4.3.2   Counterplay as a shared practice

After experimenting alone in *Minecraft,* I wanted to expand my version of performative counterplay to include other humans as well. As explained in Chapter 3, what started out as a teaching job grew into two workshops and plenty of material for this thesis. These workshops made an anthropological approach possible, as the concept evolved throughout the workshops, and the students and I were all participants in the phenomenon I am trying to verbalize and actualize. Further, following Graeber's notion of anarchic, ethnographic research, I tried to map together a larger framework of what gameplay as performance can offer players and researchers in both game studies and performance studies.

As discussed in Chapter 2, I believe that we are constantly engaged and in relation to multiple others of varied species and materialities. Therefore, all counterplay is shared practice. However, there is a difference between sharing it with other humans, rather than other non-humans. Non-human agency has been discussed in depth in the previous chapter, and now it is time to turn our gaze back to human companions. Differing from my nomadic solo experiences, counterplay in the workshops fully grounded in material practice and action, as opposed to the philosophical nature of the first. Nevertheless, the theoretical foundation built in the previous stage continued solid, and my way of looking at gameplay had already been altered for good.

Out of the 31 performances between the two workshops, only a handful resulted in performative counterplay. Most of them were performances that in some way utilized games, or gameplay that was observed by a live audience. This was in many ways expectable, as I did not want to order a certain type of performance. In addition, I believe performative counterplay is difficult to produce by demand – rather it happens if several small details occur at the same time. I do not wish to be cryptic or build an air of mysticism, but sometimes performances just operate in unknown ways. The performances made in the workshops were briefly ideated, practiced, and performed, and thus, there was not really time for reflection and

development. Thus, the performative counterplay I observed might give us guidelines on how to find and produce those moments of counterplay. Performative counterplay is a practice, and as any other practice, it requires labor, both human and computational.

In Chapter 4.2, I described some examples of counterplay that happened while focusing on the nonhumans instead of humans. Those moments were spontaneous, at least in terms of counterplay, and stood out especially in contradiction to the performances in which counterplay was intended. In the fourth assignment, the task was to "break the rules", basically any rules the performers desired. Many of the performances included breaches of gamer code and the social norms of gameplay. In two of the performances, one performer was commenting on the gameplay of the other; in one, the performers touched the screen, and in another, the player performer tried to play *Bloodborne* without using violence. The performance made with *Super Mario Kart* included several different types of counterplay: one performer slept, another drove backwards the whole time, and a third manipulated the controller to play by itself and went to get coffee in the meantime (Huuhka 2024, 17). They also ate cookies they found in the performance space – adding a little appropriation of snacks to their arsenal of counterplay practices. Some of the practices mentioned were aligned with tactics proposed by Nakamura and Wirman. Others, such as sleeping on the floor or eating someone else's cookies expanded the notion of counterplay beyond the screen and even beyond the assumed division of stage and audience. These little actions were the first inklings of what I in Article IV, "Anarchic counterplay – Re-imagining gameplay as an act of performative resistance", sketched as anarchic counterplay. In the next chapter, I will discuss the definition of anarchic counterplay and analyze some examples in more detail.

5 TOWARDS NEW THEORY: COUNTERPLAY AS RESISTANCE

My fourth and last article focused on anarchic counterplay – or rather started to imagine what it would be like. As introduced in Chapter 2, after the workshops, I started to search for a more radical theoretical approach to counterplay. I felt that the prior theoretical contributions, especially those of Nakamura and Wirman as well as Apperley, although offering useful tools for counterplay, were somewhat distant from performance as a radical act of counterplay. For example, a lot of the examples offered by said researchers focused on succeeding in or at least completing the game or gaining some advantages in specific games. I wanted to find something that would have no benefit whatsoever in relation to gameplay. I was interested in things that happen somewhere outside, or rather next or behind the actual gameplay.

I felt that a more performance-oriented theoretical viewpoint was needed. I decided to turn to Antonin Artaud, who has a reputation of being a rebel against the conventions of theater – a cryptic avantgarde figure in the theater history of the 20th century. From Artaud, I have adapted the aim of anarchic destruction (Artaud 1966, 93) which creates space for anarchic poetry (White 2018, 101) or, in my examples, anarchic counterplay. I have always believed resistance has more potential through humor and laughter,[32] and this approach applies to anarchic counterplay as well, even if that does not necessarily resonate with Artaud.

In this, final chapter of this introductory piece, I will discuss the possibility of counterplay as resistance, summarize the findings from the fourth article "Anarchic counterplay – Re-imagining gameplay as an act of performative resistance" (2024), and develop the concept of anarchic counterplay further.

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[32] Larry Bogad's work is a great example of this. See, for example, Bogad (2016).

5.1   Counterplay as an act of resistance

To begin drafting a practice of resistance, one must first define what they are resisting. In Article I, I positioned counterplay performances against the immersive pull of the gameplay experience. While resisting immersion is essential to anarchic counterplay, there are other phenomena worth fighting against. From Empire to representation, a player-performer engaging in counterplay practices can battle or instead shelter from a variety of oppressive practices.

5.1.1   Resisting the Empire

In the articles, I have pointed towards "the logic of video games", by which I mean several characteristics that often coexist in video games, especially more popular titles. The first is that there is a relationship to money and thus to capitalism: video games are an enormous business, with variety of different ways of monetizing. Free (indie) games exist, but as developing games is a job in our capitalist society, most people are and should be compensated for their labor, either with wages, or in the case of art games, grants. This applies to all cultural products and does not mean that countermeasures should not be taken.

In the *Games of Empire* (2009), Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter suggest that "video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism – and of some of the forces presently challenging it" (ibid. xv).[33] Virtual games are the media of Empire because – following a distilled summary of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter – they have been born from the military industry's needs; they have been created by new immaterial hacker labor; game machines have enabled the learning of digital and communication skills for entire generations; the game industry has led the way in accumulation based on "intellectual property rights, cognitive exploitation, cultural hybridization, transcontinentally subcontracted dirty work, and world-marketed commodities"; as a "boundless exercise of biopower" they blur the boundaries of "voluntary activity and precarious exploitation"; they are a commodity available legally only to the global rich; they offer flexible roles for flexible, able, neoliberal subjects; and finally, they are also a demonstration of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2001) as game culture includes countercultural

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[33] Empire is used by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to describe the political order of globalization. (Hardt and Negri 2001)

movements (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xxix–xxx). Video games have been and still are all things listed above, yet there have been some significant changes in the game industry since *Games of Empire*. For example, David B. Nieborg has noted that increased possibilities of independent game creation, especially in the form of applications, have radical potential, but ultimately still operate on hypercapitalist models (Nieborg 2021).

What is then the potential of anarchic counterplay in relation to Empire and the game industry as the media of Empire? First, framing counterplay as intermedial performance allows for a shift in the dynamics and hierarchies of different media. When we move from the medium of games towards the medium of performance, we can position ourselves differently: from players to performers, from consumers to creators. Secondly, by denying the intended uses and choosing to use things 'inappropriately', we also abandon such hypercapitalist principles as demand, consumption, and production.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Pasi Väliaho has argued video games to be places of production of neoliberal subjects: certain types of video games train our brains for quick decision making and adaptation to fast changing, precarious positions offered to us in our neoliberal settings (Väliaho 2014, 21). Väliaho offers first-person shooter games as examples, and in Article I, I referred to the inherent colonialism of *Minecraft* (Huuhka 2019, 226) – or any exploration game for that matter. My counterplay in *Minecraft* was searching for ways of experiencing or even enjoying without being part of oppressive processes. As described in Chapter 3, those practices were abandoning all gameplay aspects entirely.

Maybe even more important than the inherent capitalism is the striving for success and victory in games. Part of the definition of a game, the "victory condition"(see, e.g., Adams 2013) sets the tone for the gameplay experience. Even if one plays badly, playing still requires some means of striving for success to be considered playing. Another side of the coin is the possibility of failure, through which success is then mirrored. If one cannot fail, there is no possibility for victory either (Juul 2013). Success is present in arenas beginning from schoolyard games, and, over time, from football to video games. Even if your task in the game is to fail, it is still success within the logic of that particular game.

Resisting success can then perhaps be the starting point. It is a contradictory goal: is resisting success not a victory, if the goal is to resist it? To jump over this hurdle, we should focus on the affordances given to us through one art form and then

transformed through another art form. Here, we are talking of the transformative power of performance: what carries through when gameplay becomes performance? What stays, what is abandoned?

5.1.2   Resisting immersion

Gameplay, especially in video games, engages players both mentally and physically, in virtual and actual realities. These processes are often discussed under the term of immersion (e.g., Laurel 1991; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Galloway 2006) and incorporation (Calleja 2011). These processes are similar in other immersive experiences, like in immersive theater.

In his quest to challenge dominant theater practices of his time, Antonin Artaud aimed for total theater, theater that utilizes different media, physical changes on the stage and in the audience (Morris 2022, 56) and

> furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. (Artaud 1966, 93)

One could argue that certain types of video games and other immersive experiences, including immersive theater, produces the above-described inner level experiences. Different media together create a total artwork, which has the potential to affect the player/spectator/performer in ways that go beyond make-believe. Here we come to Väliaho's understanding of immersion:

> rhythmically intertwined processes of arousal, affectivity, and motor response by which we animate images rendering them as real and living in perception – but, as just important, we invest these images with the power to animate us and to become part of the intimate material of our subjective realities. (Väliaho 2014, 29)

Immersion, especially in video games, is thus thoroughly material, embodied experience: players tend to move their bodies, including their mouths and eyes while playing (Galloway 2006, 4). As such, gameplay can be seen as a contemporary take on Artaud's total theater.

Now, as mentioned earlier, Artaud serves as a starting point for anarchist counterplay, and thus the immersive, more-than-make-believe ideal of theater – and video games – becomes the object of resistance.

5.1.3 Resisting representational thinking

As I argued in the previous chapter, gameplay as performance emerges when we deliberately move beyond representation. This mindful practice denies the possibility of success – if the goal, or the representation of the goal, of the intended result is made irrelevant, there is no more urge for victory or success. None of this is as easy, nor as simple as I may declare it. Moving beyond representation is difficult, as we understand the world through them and because of them. The aim of this practice is to look at the actions, especially in-game but also off-game as purely what they are: movement of pixels, machinery, algorithms, humans and so on.

Counterplay as a practice of resistance is a complicated one, as the player, from the moment of starting to play, is intertwined with computational logic. Justin Keever has noted that as the player is constantly being read and interpreted by the computer, even mindless acts become rationalized. Keever writes:

> The player is created by being subjected to this computational, calculable, economic grid of intelligibility: it is the material interface by which the player is 'read' and by which they respond -- which really means that this interface is the material practice which *forms the player as a player-subject*. (Keever 2022)

This leads to a conclusion that counterplay can never happen purely within the game world, even the game device. This notion matches with my observations: the further from the game device the performances were, the more they commented on gameplay as practice.

What could be then the process of forming a player-performer? What if the interface is no longer the material practice, but rather a materiality that is part of the process somehow? Is the practice of performing the material practice, or the practice of refusing the key? Counterplay invites us to invent another type of *as if* instead of a representational one: performative *as if* operates in the realm of materialities.

5.2 Anarchic counterplay

5.2.1 Defining anarchic counterplay

To begin defining anarchic counterplay, one must first establish an understanding of what anarchic stands for in my research. In my article, I adapted anarchic to an attitude and an approach, and performance to be the method of knowledge

production (Huuhka 2024, 1–2). I understand anarchic to be "lacking order, regularity, or definiteness" (Merriam Webster, n.d.-a) and further, follow the contemporary, intersectional anarchist attitude that relies on rhizomes and communities rather than individualist practices (Lazar 2018). Anarchic attitude is against the three nemeses named in the previous chapter: Empire, individual victories, and representational thinking.

In my fourth article, I formulated anarchic counterplay as follows:

> Anarchic counterplay stands for all mischievous acts of doing otherwise within a certain video game setting. It abandons all achievements and progress inside the game, it refuses to follow the narrative and opens a space of random interactions. (Huuhka 2024, 4)

This phrasing offers a rather practical approach to anarchic counterplay: it is essentially about doing differently, about engaging with the game, gameplay, game device and/or game situation in a way that changes something, and the frame of performance is essential to achieving that change. This approach resonates with de Certeau's formulation of strategies and tactics discussed briefly in Chapter 2.3.2. Anarchic counterplay operates the same way as de Certeau's tactics: achieving small, fleeting victories in relation to dominant, capitalist institutions and their strategies. Tactics of anarchic counterplay formulate practices that allow people – in this research, players – to "reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (de Certeau 1984, xiv).

To deepen this process of doing differently, I turn to Artaud and his concept of anarchic destruction, which was the purpose of the Theatre of Cruelty (Artaud 1966, 93). The theater of Cruelty was, according to Joel White, aimed at awaking anarchic reflection and creating a crisis, anarchic destruction, and thus transforming or collapsing the structure in question. White formulates that "anarchic destruction is an energetic destruction of conformism", which creates space and potential for anarchic poetry (White 2018, 100–101). I have argued that within the practice of anarchic counterplay, anarchic reflection is the tool to demolish rigid strictures and conventions, and anarchic counterplay (anarchic poetry) happens in the space revealed by this destruction (Huuhka 2024, 6). As structures, hierarchies, and norms change, anarchic counterplay can then adapt accordingly. It is a tool rather than a fixed solution, and as such, is suitable for addressing different oppressive constructions. In other words, resistance stems from the current political and social climate.

Artaud had an interest in 'oriental' theater[34] and practices such as ecstatic states and trance (Bermel 2013, 16), which would now probably be labeled as immersive practices. As immersion is something sought out in gameplay experiences, anarchic counterplay is positioned against immersive experiences. In that way, the Artaudian approach starts to look like a Brechtian approach. German theater director Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* – estrangement – means distancing the audience from the performance to be able to see the 'truth' in context within the society (Jestrovic 2006, 4). Estrangement as practice means that the illusion or, in game terms, *immersion* is challenged. The difference between the Brechtian and Artaudian approaches can be understood as a difference in form and intention: Brechtian precise and informative aesthetics clash with the gratuitous and raw mess that the Artaudian approach creates (Roihankorpi 2022).

I would argue that a change in perspective allows for a change in practices. Thus, anarchic counterplay requires the player/performer to adopt a new stance on games and gameplay. For example, the player/performer could deliberately underachieve while playing, and this underachievement then becomes a performance offering critical, anarchic reflection on the process itself. (Huuhka 2024, 10) Counterplay is always about processes, it is fluid and flexible, and involves humans and non-humans that gain their collective meanings as parts of the counterplay process – in other words, nothing is created outside that specific counterplay performance (Huuhka 2024, 11).

Anarchic counterplay can have elements of gameplay, in the same way Artaud's theater was still theater. It is the frame of performance that allows for the shift in perspective, given that the actions usually related to gameplay alter their purpose. They become gratuitous in the context of gameplay, as they stop producing in-game and off-game capital. Further, the frame of performance allows different meanings to emerge. For example, while playing, the game device tends to become invisible, unless glitches and other hiccups in the technological performance remind the player

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[34] Artaud saw a Balinese dance troupe perform in the Colonial Exhibition in Paris 1931, thus he's experience was thoroughly shaped by the colonialist ethos of his time, as well as the physical circumstances provided by the Colonial exhibition. He wrote his essay *On the Balinese Theatre* right after the performance. As such, Artaud's writings should be taken as an inspired interpretation of what Artaud saw, and one must remember that he most likely misunderstood key elements of Balinese theatre. See (Su 2009).

of the material nature of gameplay[35]. In the workshops, any technical errors were read as intentional parts of the performance (Huuhka 2024, 12).

5.2.2 Searching for gratuitousness

Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty manifests itself at "the scene of the end of all", when there is no audience left to witness the performance, and the figure of the performer, driven by compulsion, keeps on performing and gesturing gratuitously among the ruins of society (Roihankorpi 2015, 112). This inherent gratuitousness of performance indicates that it has no purpose outside itself, nor does it produce anything tangible. The same applies to gameplay as a practice. There are exceptions, such as salaries or awards received from both performing and gaming, but those are more connected to reactions to performance and gameplay than those practices themselves. As Riku Roihankorpi suggests, Artaudian practice resides in "disrupting, displacing and re-orienting processes, not in achieving or weighing results" (Roihankorpi 2020, 145), and this approach is crucial in anarchic counterplay as well. In my article, I suggested that the frame of performance creates another layer of gratuitousness from gameplay: gameplay as performance is stripped from objects and goals, achievement, and victories. Thus, even the intrinsic system of value production is dismantled (Huuhka 2024, 7).

The nomadic wanderings discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 can also be interpreted as Artaudian practice. According to Audronė Žukauskaitė, nomadic art can be defined through the concept of body without organs (Žukauskaitė 2015). First introduced by Artaud and later adapted by Deleuze and Guattari who use it to refer to practices in which the body – paranoid, drugged, schizoid, masochist (and I would add that of an immersed gamer) – fights against systems of organization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and "invents new forms of sensation and subjectivity" (Žukauskaitė 2015, 13). Žukauskaitė writes:

> theatre becomes nomadic not only in the sense that all its conventional forms start shifting and trembling but in the sense that it becomes a non-representable life flow, which is asignifying, asubjective and inorganic. (*ibid.* 2015, 14)

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[35] For more on how glitches change the perception of video game worlds see for example Janik 2017 and Gualeni 2019.

Anarchic counterplay thus strives towards these characteristics of nomadic performance, however video games as a medium have their limitations.

How then does gameplay as performance add to these notions of gratuitousness and nomadic resistance to representations? First, I must admit that regarding the workshops, demand for gratuitousness is problematic. The students created performances as course assignments: they received credits in compensation for their creative work. I facilitated those workshops and designed the assignments to gain knowledge for my research. My wanderings in *Minecraft* were inspired by my theoretical curiosity. In Article IV, I suggest that even if the demand for gratuitousness is not met on all levels, we could see these performances as a test ride in the path towards truly gratuitous, anarchic counterplay (*ibid.* 13).

Artaud wanted to end all masterpieces in his urge to renew theater. For the conceptualization of anarchic counterplay, it is crucial to establish what those masterpieces are, those canonized entities in the context of gameplay. As we are referring to structures rather than specific games, I would argue ignoring the content of the game content would be the first step. By content, I mean storylines, narratives, guidelines, and rules. If we would consider these things as the masterpieces to be destroyed, we would again slip into giving importance to the structures under criticism. In other words, I suggest that narratives, rules, and other such game elements should be equal elements in counterplay with everything else, from the players' bodies to the battery of the controller. An anarchic counterplay performance should not deal directly with the thing it opposes, but rather open a whole new perspective on the issues under scrutiny (*ibid.* 13).

I believe meaning and knowledge can emerge from gratuitousness, but those meanings are rarely premeditated. Therefore, the conflict between Artaudian gratuitousness and knowledge production via performance may not be that big after all. Artaudian, gratuitous knowledge may arise from coincidences and randomness, or from collisions of two different forces, in this case, video games and performance.

5.2.3   Anarchic counterplay in action

I have argued throughout this thesis that performative and anarchic counterplay are first and foremost practices. They are the result of theoretical thoughts and potential, but they cannot exist merely on a theoretical level. They are full of potential that needs be actualized to exist.

During my experiments in *Minecraft,* I was not intentionally looking for anarchic counterplay, because at the time, I was just beginning the process of sketching what gameplay as performance and performative counterplay could be. In this case, anarchic counterplay stemmed from silence and slowness, as they are opposing actions for what *Minecraft* would usually call for. The most concrete counterplay element was the refusal to build anything (Huuhka 2024, 15). As *Minecraft* is first and foremost a building game, refusing to build opens up a weird void in the game – in a world that is created for one thing and one thing only, refusing to do that one thing sweeps away any possible sense of purpose. Thus, all actions become gratuitous and devoid of representation in the context of the game and gameworld. *Minecraft* – or any other game for that matter – is perpetually a space for counterplay to emerge. In order to exist, counterplay must have something to oppose it, and player(s) – human or non-human – to make it visible. Thus, video games are always full of counterplay potential.

As discussed in previous chapters, not all performances made in the workshops had elements of counterplay in them, and even fewer had hints of anarchic tendencies in them.

In the Konstanz workshop, one group used Lego Harry Potter (2010) in their performances. The first one was a chocolate searching narrative inside the game world with the game characters and resembled a child's play. The second, however, tickled the realm of counterplay. They inserted the DVD into the game device (some older Xbox if I recall) and started playing. The screen was black, the game was running, and the human performers were discussing their adventure as if they could see it. This performance was significant, as it went against the unwritten rules of both gameplay and those of the classroom. First, gameplay could not be seen at all, and thus it created a void of perception. Second, in the Konstanz workshop, the human audience's gazes had been mostly directed at the screen, even if human performers had been actively involved in the performance world. As the actual gameplay footage was out of the equation, the only thing left to look at was the black screen or the human performers, who were performing as if they were playing. Thus, the whole performance was very subtle. The counterplay was in the challenge proposed at the concept of gameplay in general, as well as at the tradition of watching the screen instead of human players in our classroom. This performance created a different atmosphere compared to the rest, as it pushed both the performers and the audience out of their comfort zones. Further, as the performance, or more specifically, the virtual part of it, happened outside of the reach of the human senses, it can be seen

as a performance at the end of it all, and thus, it resonates with Artaudian performance, as discussed previously.

The last assignment in the Tampere workshop was to break all the possible rules of gameplay. The majority of the groups decided to break the social rules of gaming. All human activity has unwritten social codes and norms of behavior, and in games, these are called implicit rules (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 130). The fact that so many groups decided to break social norms was interesting, as it clearly demonstrated that both gameplay and performance are essentially shared practices. These disruptive actions included criticizing other players, giving unsolicited advice, and touching the screen and thus leaving a fingerprint on it (Huuhka 2023, 17). One group chose to make their performance with *Super Mario Kart,* and each performer broke rules on their own. One performer slept on the floor; one drove the wrong way and was repeatedly turned around by the game; and one left their controller unattended, left the room, got coffee, and returned to watch the others play while eating cookies. The cookies were left to the room by someone outside our group, and the performer decided to eat them impromptu in the heat of the performance. I found this especially interesting, as it clearly demonstrates the transformative power of performance: something unthinkable in an off-game/performance social code becomes quite relevant as a part performance (*ibid.* 17).

It might be that the coded rules, or the affordances of specific games were more challenging to breach – even though there were some occasions where the game was played opposite of how it was supposed to be played without actually breaking any rules. This was the case with *Goat Game* (2014)*,* which was played by walking the goats in an orderly fashion along city streets. This was extremely hard, as the physics of the game encourage or even demand arbitrary bounces from one place to another.

Further, to come back to Artaud, it was as gratuitous as it could get – there was no point in either performing it or watching it. Any aims for leisure, fun, excitement, entertainment, or any sort of artistic or technical mastery were absent. And yet, the absence of all things interesting created some more. It kept the physical elements of gameplay, but made them gratuitous, and thus offered a changed perspective on the rhizome of gameplay. I claim that anarchic, performative counterplay opens up space by doing otherwise by uncovering hidden structures, expectations, motivations and challenging the status quo (Huuhka 2024, 17).

How can one produce anarchic counterplay deliberately? Anarchic counterplay addresses rigid structures and hierarchies, and in games, those would be processes

concerning playability, narrative, and game objects. Thus, anarchic counterplay would focus on gameplay purely as actions, disregarding the rules and content of any particular game. In Article IV, I argue that a possible way of creating anarchic counterplay would be taking video games and game devices as material entities, as well as the whole gameplay experience as a material rhizome of actions, meanings and knowledge produced together with entities from different origins (Huuhka 2024, 18–19). As suggested in Chapter I, anarchic counterplay operates in territories between gameplay and performance, and between play and resistance. It is simultaneously all of the above and none of them, it suggests a new way of stirring it all together. If video games are a mess (Bogost 2009), and Artaudian theater is gratuitous yet compelling (Roihankorpi 2015; 2020), then anarchic counterplay is a gratuitous, compelling mess that challenges traditions, norms and concepts of its origins.

5.3 Imagining utopic futures

Throughout this journey the aim has been to offer new ways of challenging the hierarchic structures of capitalist (game) discourse. The outcomes have not always been fun, not even playful, but nevertheless, they have inspired me and others to think differently. As a researcher, I have aimed to not only examine the existing phenomena of counterplay, but to make new interpretations of it. As discussed in Chapter 2, the word has had negative connotations, but I believe the reader may have different thoughts now, after venturing to the end of this thesis. As with all research that deals with a rapidly changing field such as video games, many of the examples – herein, specific games – may already seem to be outdated. I do not, however, think that that matters: the games used as examples could be any games already published or yet to be designed. Anarchic counterplay is not tied to a specific time, genre, or trend/phase of game development, but rather, it is a tool that is useful when figuring out our relationship to gameplay in general.

I would like to refer to Jill Dolan, who claims that live performance offers a collective space where a different, better world can be created (2005, 2). Gameplay as a shared practice has the potential to offer these moments of collective creation, and anarchic counterplay is one way of approaching it mindfully. Acts of resistance against certain structures open space elsewhere, and in that space, utopic futures can be imagined. Performative and/or anarchic counterplay are speculative practices,

indeed they change the world by challenging hierarchies, suggesting new ways of being and doing, and of interacting on physical and virtual levels.

In this thesis, I have strived to verbalize the practice of performative and anarchic counterplay. Performative counterplay challenges any particular game by moving the focus beyond the game, beyond the expected, and embracing the rhizome of video games as part of the performance, not as an object of actions. Performance allows thinking differently and doing otherwise, it creates a critical distance between games as cultural objects and their meanings. Furthermore, anarchic counterplay pushes further, and makes a mess by forgetting the conventions of gameplay, and challenging those of performance. It produces meaning through gratuitousness, through colliding norms, and by embracing the randomness of the gameplay assemblage.

My research is part of a continuum of applications of Antonin Artaud's thinking. It is the first extensive work that expands Artaud's concepts to the medium, rather than the content, of video games.[36] This step seems logical: as mentioned in Chapter 1, Artaud already talked about virtual reality in 1938. The virtual reality discussed in this thesis resonates with the one Artaud envisioned: a world of "characters, objects, images" that allow for theater to emerge into existence (Artaud 1966, 50). I believe my work is challenging the status quo of research on Artaud, who is somewhat of an iconic figure in the field of theater research. I have aimed to distance my work from the character that is known as Artaud – I believe the focus should move towards applications instead of the person. Thus, this thesis does not feature a name pointing to Artaud, but rather by the use of the term *anarchic,* it is positioned into the same tradition of questioning the norm.

I believe video game performances alter our conceptions of both video games and theater, as such they are building a new hybrid art form challenging the materialities and conventions of both previous phenomena. I believe anarchic counterplay can be a part of this new, emergent, art form. Gazing into the future, I believe that all sorts of intertwinings of performance and video games will be even more popular. This was already visible during this research: when I began, performance and games were mostly discussed together in the context of LARPs, but now virtual game worlds and their interpretations have become popular

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[36] I have found some texts that look at video games as possible places of producing Theatre of Cruelty (see, e.g., Sainsbury 2018; D. Scott 2019).

especially in the field of live art. It is easy to see big theater institutions taking on new mediums of stage presence[37] on – and as video games already offer a space for roleplay, I believe the game industry will explore augmented and virtual realities with roleplaying games, thus expanding the concept of LARPs beyond physical space. Applying the concept of anarchic counterplay to roleplay may open new ways of imagining the relationship between the avatar and the performer – and may even ditch the avatar altogether. It would be interesting to conduct more research on that front: how could the concept of playing a character through anarchic counterplay be challenged?

The fast development of AI technology is creating challenges as well as interesting possibilities. As AI-generated images become even more realistic, the concepts of life, authenticity, and perhaps even humanness continue to be challenged. On the other hand, applying an anarchic attitude to AI-generated image production can offer ways for new modes of resistance, or even imagine new, obscure, and weird spaces and modes existence.[38] I believe that practices such as performative, anarchic counterplay have an important role as a medium of critique in relation not only to video games, but to all digital and virtual (hegemonic) cultures.

In the future, I would like to continue working with applications of anarchic counterplay and related strategies of everyday resistance. It would be interesting to continue organizing workshops, perhaps for marginalized groups. How could the practice of anarchic counterplay bring forth different experiences and ways of understanding digital and virtual environments? And how could the evolving entity AI be a part of anarchic rebellion against itself? It seems obvious that hierarchical, rigid structures evolve and modify together with and in accordance with technological, societal, and especially economic currents: thus, there is always a need for updated practices of resistance.

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[37] I believe that productions using augmented reality, virtual reality, motion capture technology, avatars, etc. will soon be as common as performances that utilize full-motion videos now.

[38] I have generated video game-themed images for my lectures. The results have been rather haunting.

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PUBLICATIONS

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PUBLICATION
I

Journeys in Intensity: Human and Non-Human Co-Agency, Neuropower and Counterplay in Minecraft

Marleena Huuhka

11 Journeys in Intensity

Human and Nonhuman Co-Agency, Neuropower, and Counterplay in *Minecraft*

Marleena Huuhka

> In the end, you know it's all just blocks.
>
> akkashtin (*Minecraft* Forum, n.d.[1])

Once again, I find myself and other entities in a random location in world that is constantly being generated – block upon and next to another – as far as my avatar's body and location let me see. And beyond that, ever so far are the unreachable edges and countless wonders of the virtual world I have just entered. The end of the world is unreachable as the world is constantly, randomly, and infinitely generated as my avatar moves forward in the world. As a result of this procedural creation, the world in question does not exist, yet. Only the algorithm and the code do, but everything else is on the verge of being actualized. This process happens as a shared activity between the player and countless other elements and agents, such as pixels, algorithms, and game developers.

This engagement to creation and co-agency happens inside the player experience of a commercial product called *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is a sandbox videogame first developed by Mojang AB in 2009. In 2018, it was the second best-selling videogame of all time – after *Tetris* – and available for various platforms including consoles, PCs, and mobile devices (Wikipedia 2018). It can be played both as a single-player and as a group of many players via the Internet, and it has several game modes, which vary in difficulty.

The basic idea of *Minecraft* is to explore and build a world of one's own. The world consists of blocks of different materials, and the player digs, chops, shovels them up, and then organizes them again in different formations such as houses and railroads. Food is acquired by hunting, gathering, or farming. The basic gameplay has no specific goals; the only set objective is to survive in a sometimes-perilous environment. The game does not end if the player dies; they merely drop all they are carrying at that moment and then respawn again to previously determined coordinates. Even though the game has no set goals or quests, the players easily set them for themselves. The urge to accomplish something – whether it

is a huge castle or a gate to the Netherworld – makes *Minecraft* a highly addictive game. As the possibilities are almost endless – limited only by the rules of the game and the players' imagination – one can never win or finish the game.

As said, the world is created and constructed in front of the avatar's/ player's eyes, and it is tied to the movement of the avatar and thus to the choices of direction or speed of movement and action the player makes. Herein lies the immersive power of *Minecraft*: everything is always new and exciting even though the player might have seen every single block type many times before. It is the specific way the blocks organize; this time is always different from the last. As *Minecraft* is filled with little bugs and strange incidents, such as a tree growing from air or an abandoned well in the middle of the desert, the player never knows what to expect. The player is constantly invited to wander a step further or to dig one cube deeper. Desire to go further and to dig deeper can rouse desire to possess and to leave traces or signs of one's presence in the virtual environment. This desire can be interpreted as colonial: the narrative of the game rests upon the trope of the great (male) explorer bravely venturing into uncharted, uninhabited lands. This desire is obviously more distinct in multiplayer games, where the players express their presence and accomplishments to other players. However, even when playing alone, the desire to leave a mark on the environment is present.

This chapter sets out to map the human and nonhuman co-agencies at work in videogames and gameplay situations. Videogame studies have multiple and contradictory definitions for the concept of a game. The main disagreement has long been about the ontology of games: whether they are essentially systems of rules, or narratives. I wish to pass this conflict of narratological and ludological theories by relying on Ian Bogost's definition: "video games are a mess" (Bogost 2009). Bogost states that games are by nature vague and effusive and as such they cannot be pushed to fit into strict categories. Games are never either/ or but always both – and thus it is beneficial to abandon hierarchical definitions altogether. Some common elements – which are also present in *Minecraft* – can, however, be defined. All videogames have some sort of rules limiting and guiding gameplay (e.g. Suits 1978), and they are all characterized by the interaction between human and the game device (Galloway 2006, 2). In addition, all videogames are play, *paidia*, which is by definition voluntary and meaningful in itself (e.g. Huizinga 1967; Suits 1978; Caillois 2001; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

This chapter has three key points. The first is to deconstruct the subject-object dichotomy surrounding human interaction with other materialities. Drawing from the works of Baruch Spinoza, Jane Bennett, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I argue that we cannot take responsibility nor glory for our actions, as they are always produced in

cooperation with forces sometimes unknown and unseen to us. Spinoza argues that everything in this world is made of the same substance. All separate bodies – human and nonhuman – are manifestations of this divine substance (see Spinoza 1994). Deleuze and Guattari follow Spinoza with concepts of *rhizome* and *assemblage*, which both are horizontal ways of organizing agencies and relations (Deleuze and Guattari 2014). In her book *Vibrant Matter – A political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett builds upon Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, and suggests ways of taking inorganic matter seriously in the contemporary anthropocentric atmosphere.

Second, I build on Pasi Väliaho's (2014) work, which suggests that videogames and their immersive qualities have a role in building docile neoliberal subjects constantly ready for change and insecurity in today's capitalist societies. These building processes rest on the use of "neuropower", which Väliaho defines as follows:

> capturing the brain's capacity to simulate in order to teach the political reality of life today based on the management of risk and the securitization of the future, whether through military action, financial speculation, or other means.
>
> (Väliaho 2014, xiii)

Though examples used by Väliaho are mainly from first-person shooter games, similar processes are at work also in *Minecraft*: the logic of capitalism, conquest, and possession are offered through the narrative and the game mechanics. As previously mentioned, *Minecraft* is in its infinity an addictive game. This addiction is crucial to videogames as capitalist consumer products, which – however pleasant or educative they might be – invite players to invest both their time and money in global corporations.

Third, I will explore the concept of counterplay used by Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman (2005), and Thomas Apperley (2010). Counterplay is a collection of tactics the players can utilize when they wish to do something un-thought of by the developers of the game in question. Toward the end of this chapter, I will discuss two possible ways of resisting the capitalist agenda of colonialism and docile subjectivity available for the player in *Minecraft*. I wish to draw a (part of a) map of possible resistance through aimless wandering and immobility, which are both seen here as journeys in intensity.

The perspective in this chapter is that of my own body, mind, and avatar; this is an auto-ethnographical piece based on my experiences. Something else, however, is lurking behind the human-produced body of text. Because the perspectives of countless other human and nonhuman entities are constantly influencing my experience of the game, I am never alone on my adventure in this block-shaped world.

Co-Agencies

> You are the player, and I am the block. Together we make Minecraft.
>
> Pizzamanilla

When I start *Minecraft* on my Xbox, I am greeted by a random word or a phrase chosen first by the people who created the game and then presented to me by the algorithm managing this particular function. One day this greeting is "*Polynomia!!!*" I become immediately fascinated by this word. It is the plural of "*polynomium*", which is a noun for something that is "*polynomial*". *Polynomial* is a term used in algebra to mean "an expression of more than two algebraic terms, especially the sum of several terms that contain different powers of the same variable(s)", or in taxonomy to mean "a Latin name consisting of more than two terms". The word consists of the Greek word *poly* ("many") and the Latin word *nomen* ("name or part") (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). *Polynomials* are also used in coding, which is probably the reason the word has found its place among other, more content-related words, in the *Minecraft* menu.

All this seems perfectly understandable in the context of *Minecraft*. It can indeed be considered an expression consisting of a sum of more than two terms and variables as well as a designation consisting of multiple terms. As such, the word provides an entry point to the co-agential, material rhizomes that are in action and existence during and around my active gameplay sessions.

Gameplay as an action reaches beyond the representational levels of the game in question, and can thus be seen as material activity created through and in the bodies of my human and nonhuman peers and myself. All agencies involved in my game experience are physical bodies, though some of them cannot be reached directly by human senses. A concrete, material body in direct contact with the player is the game device: the computer or the console. It is a composition of metals and plastics that can be extended by additional parts, like a mouse, a screen, or an Internet cable. More bodies can be found behind this device's visible materiality: for example, the body of programming language, that manifests and moves the pixels, and that of electricity, which powers up both my experience and the processes of programming and development before that. Electricity and pixels can easily be seen as something less material, something from the other realm. However, their materiality is undeniable.

All the nonhumans and humans – coders, other players, and designers among others – are located in the common rhizome on the same plane of immanence that is in existence during my gameplay sessions. In other words, I am never alone but always unavoidably connected with countless others and other worlds. This connection surpasses the limitations of time and place and relies on co-agency beyond the differences in

materiality. In *Minecraft*, I am connected with all the forces mentioned above. As also argued above, gameplay is never merely a human experience. In *Minecraft*, the materiality of the blocks is, in the end, connected to my own as gameplay can be seen post- or antihumanist in nature.

Baruch Spinoza, the philosopher of joy, has been considered one of the first antihumanists. Spinoza implies that if humans are different and separate from the rest of the world and its beings, then humans cannot exist (Hardt and Negri 2005, 103). For Spinoza, there is only one infinite godly substance that is everything and everything is a part of this substance (Spinoza 1994, 54). The world, every single thing in the universe, every single body and being are moduses of this substance (Spinoza 1994, 145). That is to say, all of us, all of these human and nonhuman bodies that form and manifest themselves in this world, are embodiments of the same substance or material. This is Spinoza's antihumanism at its barest: humans cannot be separated from everything else. In other words, hierarchies between beings are – or at least should be – fundamentally non-existent.

Even though all beings have the same fundamental desire to remain in existence, it is hard not to slip into an anthropocentric view of human dominance, in this case myself and my playership, as something of higher relevance to this specific gameplay experience. However, when I strive to see and recognize the ways in which the other agents affect me, this attempt to build a hierarchy with me on top as a facilitator is met by objections. I do not dictate gameplay situation; I am by no means responsible or at the top of the imagined hierarchy. That being said, it is also crucial to recognize the fact that accepting others as equals does not erase all hierarchies. Nonetheless, active attempts to shake them can and should be made. In the era of global environmental catastrophes, deconstructing the dream of human dominance over other species and materialities is crucial. Analyzing videogames through materialist theories is important: videogames, virtual reality, and augmented reality have an increasing influence on how humans – at least in the Occident – perceive the world around them, and the agents present in these new environments differ from the ones humans are used to taking into account.

Political philosopher Jane Bennett uses the concept of vibrant matter to show a glimpse of the world in which we humans change our perception of the things normally seen as lifeless. Matter, according to Bennett, is to be taken seriously as companions: active, vibrant bodies of something, which have affective relations with humans (Bennett 2010, viii). At the same time, Bennett sets out to grasp subjectivity outside the notion of humans as the rulers of the world and themselves. This goal can be achieved by searching for horizontal and equal practices in interaction with human and nonhuman matter (Bennett 2010, ix).

According to Bennett, the idea of matter as dead and inactive emphasizes the notion of human as the king of the world. This human dream of omnipotence leads to destructive practices of control, conquest, and

possession. As humans are eager to trivialize the sensations received from other materialities, we tend to over-emphasize our own liability and control of our actions. However, there is always more in action than a mere human: rhizomes of social relations as well as nonhuman actants influence our actions in unforeseen, yet unavoidable, ways (Bennett 2010, xii).

Bennett's aim is to render the multidirectionality of all relationships visible. In *Minecraft*, this relationship is seen clearly, as I, as a player, have the power to modify and enhance my environment. That is not all: I operate with pixels directly impacted by the algorithms, which of course are coded by humans, but which inside their margin of operation act freely and sometimes unexpectedly.

This engagement happens in a rhizome of different materialities and entities. Rhizome – a concept used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – is a way in which agencies organize. It takes its form from the mushroom kingdom and stands in opposition to binary tree-like models of organization. All the points of the rhizome can be connected with all the other points; there are no hierarchies in this model. Everything happens in these lines of connection, not in their meeting points (Deleuze 1992, 27). As every single point of the rhizome is potentially connected with all the others, it can be broken, yet it continues its existence infinitely toward other bodies and via other lines. Deleuze and Guattari use an ant colony as an example of rhizomatic organization. The fate of a single ant or a single nest is meaningless in regard to the fate of the colony, which will continue to grow and exist (Deleuze 1992, 30).

Rhizome is a territory of affiliation and fleeing, which produces endless indeterminate multiplicities and potentialities for infinite freedom of creation. Every single element and entity possible in a videogame, such as *Minecraft*, comes into existence solely through the lines connecting them. This means that every physical and virtual body – of mine, of the machine, and of the others – is created in relation to other bodies in that specific rhizome.

Assemblage is a form of rhizome, often explained through the concept of love. According to Deleuze and Guattari, love is not love for a person, but rather for an assemblage consisting of the loved one, the lover and all the emotions and memories associated with that relationship.

Acting with the Others In *Minecraft*

> Gravity is a lifestyle choice for many elements of the world.
>
> Hexus_One

Now that we have acknowledged the others connected to the Minecraftian rhizome, it is time to look more closely at the ways their agencies manifest. The agency of the machine, in this case my Xbox, becomes visible through mistakes. We usually think of computers as extensions

of our brains or mind, or – in the case of, for example, game consoles – as some kind of cyborg-style extra limbs providing access to the world on the other side of the screen. However, the agency of a machine has always been present, but we only take it into consideration when something unexpected happens, when the computer crashes, freezes, or breaks. The idea of being in control of the machine was thus merely imagination, as the mistake opens up a possibility of withdrawal for all the agents involved.

We can harness and use electricity, but as it is flowing, bouncing, wild, and in a constant process of becoming by nature, its body is beyond our grasp. It can break free from cables and cause blackouts and short-circuits. It can, in cooperation with other agents of the grid, disturb my game experience as well as the infrastructure of entire cities. This moment of interruption and disturbance is where the nonhuman force running our lives becomes and manifests its agency (Bennett 2010, 25–28).

Gameplay as a co-agential rhizome can be explored through Spinoza's philosophy of joy. All entities pursue happiness and greater perfection, and happiness for one is usually happiness for others, the co-actors, close by. For humans, this greater perfection can be pleasure; for electricity, the chance to flow and sparkle; and for the pixels, the chance to arrange themselves repeatedly. Here the danger of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, however, lurks near. My knowledge of the sought-after or avoided perfection or imperfection of the nonhuman is always limited; one could say it is merely a guess. However, as I previously argued, for nonhumans there exists a chance to leave this relationship through a mistake: electricity can, for example, fry the circuits, thus allowing for console to crash. As long as our cooperation runs smoothly, I can only assume we are engaging together, somewhat freely, in this rhizome of gameplay.

Above I have discussed human and nonhuman agents. However, this division is problematic. I can declare my body to be human, but I am already many, a mixture of human and nonhuman entities. Together, we are involved in constant processes of subjectivation, of multiplicity, of becoming-something (see Guattari 2010). As Donna Haraway says: "To be one is always to become with many" (Haraway 2008, 4).

Gaming as action is essentially materialistic, rhizomatic, and mimetic, and it is constructed in cooperation with human and nonhuman agencies. As such, it is always in motion, both physically and conceptually. All human actions are constructed in similar cooperative unions. When playing videogames, we gain contact with materialities often thought to be non-material or somehow out of reach. A multitude of electricity, machines, players, and algorithms engages in an assemblage that is *Minecraft*, and every moment in this assemblage is a potential moment both for creation and for a mistake as a manifestation of human or nonhuman autonomy.

The rhizomatic, shared materiality does not end where the game ends. The acts conducted in-game resonate off-game into and through my

body, in the electric wires, and so on, forever. The first step toward understanding co-agential rhizomes of humans and nonhumans is to ditch the idea of separateness or material uniqueness.

However, back to polynomia: what captured my attention was the roar of power and freedom embedded in that word. Polynomia resonates, in my ears, with the word *autonomia* (autonomy). When associated with *Minecraft*, it uncovers the potential sovereignty of the rhizome, of the collective engaged in the gaming experience. Polynomia reaches beyond me as a subject, inviting along the multiple agents involved. It opens up a possibility to start a journey of finding new ways of resisting immersive passivity of *Minecraft*. These ways of resistance can be approached via the theory of counterplay.

The power of polynomia is the notion that sovereignty is also shared. It cannot be achieved alone, and thus it is parallel to freedom. Every single agent in *Minecraft* acts with and in relation to others. Becoming-something is always rhizomatic: all my tactics and practices inside *Minecraft* are the result of cooperation. Polynomia is thus an active, political word. It is more than a word: it is a philosophical approach.

Neuropower

> You haven't played Minecraft until you forget what year it is.
>
> Stealthman917

When playing, I become immersed, drawn into the creative process of gameplay. I lose track of time; I lose track of my body. Robbie Cooper has photographed people engaged in immersive situations, such as gameplay or movie screenings (Open Culture 2013). The kids portrayed mid-game stare with unseeing eyes, their facial muscles are relaxed, leaving their mouths somewhat open. I, too, feel the muscles in my face relax as the muscles in my shoulders and arms tense. These sensations vanish quickly and return only when something interrupts my immersion. Immersion is a thorough experience; it engages all of me: my brain and my body.

What, then, is immersion, and how does it affect my fellow gamers and me? Pasi Väliaho has written about videogames as the site for production of neoliberal, docile subjects. Väliaho reminds that, in modern neuroscience, the brain is considered an adaptive, creative, and constantly self-modifying organ. It is thus not merely copying or picturing but actively predicting and hypothesizing. Brain's primary function is to anticipate the things to come, in other words, to predict the future so that the rest of the body knows what to do and how to react (Väliaho 2014, 40).

Videogames tap into this function and thus into the core characteristics of humanness. In first-person shooter games, the player is sucked into a constantly changing and evolving web – or rhizome – of actions and reactions, which, according to Väliaho, is an accurate portrayal of the

way games offer "movement and contingency as an adaptive challenge". This is a way in which the biopolitical power structures of the techno age operate: the player engages with preemptive processes that happen somewhere out of reach of conscious awareness. The rhythms and excitements produced by the speed of certain games engage the brain: they ready all our senses in the face of this virtual danger (Väliaho 2014, 40). This is the desire of conquest and thus colonization. Even though *Minecraft* has a different pace and visual identity than first-person shooter games, it is no less efficient in generating immersion and engaging the player with colonial, capitalist practices. The game itself as well as the materialities engaged with the player are active participants and agents in this production of desire and neoliberal subjectivity.

Väliaho writes:

> For player, then, the screen exists as a simulated future, capturing our bodily rhythms and prenoetic adjustments through which the affective and predictive functions of the brain merge with the video screen and vice versa.
>
> (Väliaho 2014, 41)

The body, however, does not engage merely through simulations of bodily functions. In *Minecraft*, the movements of the character are not reproductions of human movements, but something existing in their own right. The character is stiff, "unnatural", more of a pixel than a representation of an actual human entity. It can be seen as an extension of human agency, although it clearly has agential qualities itself. The likeness, or mimicry, does not play a significant role here. The immersion emerges from the actual bodily engagement of the human player, and screen is merely a device in between. I would argue that the simulated future is thus created within the player, in the desire of conquest and possession, and manifested through the cooperational rhizome of the gameplay situation. The whole gameplay situation is thus inherently nonhuman.

Minecraft caters to the desire of infinite conquest and colonization, the infinite lust of being in control. It is a platform for domination and god-like fantasies, however educational its uses might sometimes be. But are there ways to immerse oneself in *Minecraft* without being subjected to these oppressive and compelling processes?

Counterplay

> Thank you for helping us help you help us all with building.
>
> Axalto

Contemporary theories of gameplay build upon Roger Caillois's theory of play. Caillois defines two modes or opposites that govern all play,

paidia and *ludus*. *Ludus* – which also gives the name to ludology – is a disciplinary form of play, which is characterized by skill, effort, patience, and other such traits. *Paidia* is an opposing (or complementing) type of play: it is based on joy and improvisation (Caillois 2001, 13). Most forms of play obviously contain both characteristics with varying intensities. According to Caillois, ludus-guided rules are essential to play: for play to be play, basic freedoms and stimulation for fantasy are needed. The two are always complementary and related, though Caillois considers ludus to be a refinement of *paidia* (Caillois 2001, 27–29).

Thomas Apperley (2010, 141) brings up the discussion over the importance and meaning of *paidia*. *Ludus* has been considered to hold some meanings that contribute to institutional practices, such as rites and sports. *Paidia*, however, is another thing entirely: it opens up a view to play as something that does not necessarily provide any cultural values outside itself. According to Apperley, Caillois seems to set *ludus* and *paidia* in a hierarchical order. *Ludus* refines and disciplines *paidia* and turns the wild and naive elements of play into something that has meaning outside the playing field. This does not mean that *paidia* is insignificant outside the play act, rather that the significance of it is extracted through/with *ludus*.

The relevance of *ludus* and *paidia* and their different hierarchical positions comes clearer when approaching the areas where counterplay happens. Apperley describes these areas as the margin where one is free to express oneself within the limits set by the rules (and their errors) and the material requirements and limits of the game. This margin is created when the creative and unruly forces and practices are combined with the formal rules. As the "margin" is not, according to Apperley, "a realm of pure potentiality"; it is vulnerable to exploits or acts of counterplay (Apperley 2010, 140).

According to Apperley, "there is a tension between the society of control, or 'algorithmic culture' and counterplay: the emergent practices of digital game players". This tension comes from the alleged notion that the algorithms of a game already contain all the possible meanings, leaving no room for critical approach or new engagements (Apperley 2010, 132). Apperley sees counterplay as something unthought of by the developers, practiced by the players on the margins of possibility offered by the game. This approach distinguishes it from counter-gaming, which relies on interference to the code as its method (see Galloway 2006).

The significance of the human player is, according to Apperley, to be the force that sets things into motion. As long as the human does not use or tap into the code, it is mere potential. However, everything is in existence, material, yet dormant until utilized (Apperley 2010, 143). In other words, counterplay can be perceived as active participation that arises from the human need or will to do something. As long as the code just exists, it is not counterplay, even though everything needed for an action already exists.

Is potentiality action? Or is something considered an action merely when human influence is added to the mix? Apperley seems to think that human activity is the catalyst, the force that can bring forward the hidden potentialities embedded in the mishaps and the unthought-of thought of the code. This is clearly an anthropocentric approach, which sees the human as the only relevant actor. Everything else is just preparing. However, if we look at *Minecraft* as an example, things happen without direct human engagement. If we look past the act of turning the game on, all sorts of processes run even when the player does not actively practice counterplay. Thus, the potentiality is always more than mere opportunity waiting to be seized. Apperley's approach also sees action as something related to movement: something must be done to actualize the potentialities left in the margins of the code. Yet we can assume that there are other modes of moving and resisting than those that require movement in space: for example, those that concern the body of the player or temporal engagement.

Apperley points out that as gameplay is always situated and created through the human body, there are limitations to the modulation of the algorithmic culture. In order for the gameplay to actually happen, the algorithms must work in some cooperation with the rhythm of everyday life. The rhythm of everyday life is the location where, according to Apperley, the practice of counterplay takes place and from which it arises (Apperley 2010, 132). When approaching games as material environments, one may easily become stuck with the idea that the code somehow limits what one can and cannot do. It is clear that the material foundation formed upon code and algorithm do define the actions one may perform inside a game world as every single choice has to be coded in order to be made. This, however, is only one and clearly limited approach to materiality and games themselves.

According to Apperley, in order to understand the effects of everyday life and its rhythms in digital games, we must see games as more than mere codes and algorithms (Apperley 2010, 134). He does not deny the influence the regime of compulsion or discipline has on gameplay, but emphasizes the more complex ways gameplay affects and is affected:

> Rather than in relation to compulsions it is ambiguous and paradoxical; disciplinary and adaptive. It operates both as a mediator and intermediary; consequently game play is in some contexts an impartial transferor of culture, but in others, a source of new culture and relations. This is not a binary relationship: adaptation and compulsion exist in an imbricated spectrum.
>
> (Apperley 2010, 134)

To move beyond the binaries of compulsion and adaptation, Apperley draws from Bruno Latour and his discussion of mediators and

intermediaries. In Latour's actor-network theory, the roles of actors tend to be largely immaterial. An object, such as a videogame, can function in a social ensemble undictated by its essence or status. Instead, the role or function is formed in relation to other actors and connections. Apperley states that reducing games to their code is to reduce a complex activity into a closed circuit of player and the game, which already contains everything, all the meanings and possibilities (Apperley 2010, 134). With the concept of counterplay, Apperley strives to open that relationship and to follow human and nonhuman interactions further down or around the rhizome.

Following Apperley's theoretical approach does not undermine the importance of the materiality of games and gameplay. Rather, it opens up a possibility to take in consideration the different materialities entwined in gameplay processes. Counterplay can thus be seen as something that may get a little out of human or machine hands, thus creating something that cannot be described solely as one or the other. In other words, counterplay emphasizes play over gaming, which downplays the role of calculated achievements.

Counterplay is formed and practiced through actions and affordances that are already available and allowed within the rules of the game. However, actions of the counterplayer are typically something that was left to be done by mistake or that was not intended to be of any/much relevance to the gameplay. Apperley calls these actions emergent forms of play, which overlap and cross with the ways the game is meant to be played. The player may cooperate in these intersections with other human players via Internet or with machinic forces (Apperley 2010, 140). Counterplay is thus a shared affair and hence one manifestation of *polynomia*.

In their article "Girlish Counter-Playing Tactics", Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman list various ways of practicing counterplay in videogames still very much dominated by male players and developers. These tactics include "non-violence", "peaceful pace", and "alternative pathways" (Nakamura and Wirman 2005). As my emphasis lies within resisting the capitalist, goal-oriented ways of gameplay, these tactics are useful, as they highlight a more equal relationship between the game and the player.

In order to take the agency of the nonhuman seriously, the possibility of nonhuman counterplay must also be considered. Do the pixels, algorithms, game devices, or electricity have a desire to commit counterplay? One way of looking at this is to consider mistakes or bugs as forms of nonhuman counterplay. As I argued previously, machines and also algorithms make their agency noticeable through mistakes, or when something the player had not expected occurs. In *Minecraft*, it can be a non-player character getting stuck behind a rock or in mid-air, a tree growing from air, or other such quirks. If the agency of the machine is shown through the mistakes it

makes, is it not possible to see misbehaving pixels and NPCs as an act of a rebellion? Algorithms have means of deciding for themselves. It is true that their actions are limited to the programming, but so are – according to Apperley – the possibilities of humans in a similar situation. Everybody operates in the margin defined by the developers of the game. A problem lies, however, in the access to nonhuman counterplay and its intentions. As I can never know the intention of a pixel or a specific NPC, I can only guess and hypothesize about it.

The restrictions imposed by the mysteriority of the other guide my attention to another realm of counterplay. I am interested in processes that happen mostly in the player herself. This aspect of counterplay resides in the area of imagination and thus play, *paidia*. It is something undisciplined and therefore beyond strict limits or characteristics. It is also without direct consequences or benefits. This imaginary act of counterplay can be called a journey in intensity. It stems from doing much and nothing simultaneously. Counterplay is thus expanded to the body of the player: it is relevant how and what the player feels at a specific moment, what kind of resonances leave and return to the body, what is the relation between my body and, for example, the controller I am holding, and so forth. The things done or left undone are equally important: the practice can thus sometimes be situated solely in immobility. Practices of resistance and counterplay can also take place in the body of the player/ performer. As discussed earlier, gameplay alters human tissues with its immersive potential as well as with the physical injuries and aches that prolonged gaming session may produce.

Counterplay may sometimes be as simple as choosing to immerse in the game world without moving the avatar at all. Immobility may, however, be intense and thus active gameplay in itself. What is active then is the performative aspect of both the player and the avatar. What is radical in this exercise is the refusal to anticipate the future, refusing to anticipate the stimuli the game is about to offer. In other words, the player rises, no matter for how briefly or incessantly, against the production of neoliberal subject described by Väliaho.

Nomadic Resistance

> It's a big world. But someone has to explore it.
>
> Tic_Tac_Toe

My counterplay in *Minecraft* has taken the form of nomadic expedition, which challenges the urge for productivity that the game promotes. I will give two examples of my own counterplay practices: aimless wandering and immobility. In order to truly open their potentiality, a brief explanation of nomadism as a philosophical concept is in order.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the nomad as someone who does not move. This may seem weird, as wandering and displacement is characteristic to traditional nomads, but Deleuze and Guattari point to a conceptual difference. Movement requires a plan, a destination; it is something that happens between two or more predetermined points. Nomad has no plan and no destination, nomad travels via speed and intensity (Adkins 2015, 206). For Rosi Braidotti, nomadism "refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior". Thus, a nomad does not necessarily travel along physical roads or paths but engages on journeys that take place in a specific place. Nomadism is defined by its power to unravel and break conventions and norms (Braidotti 1994, 5). Deleuze, Guattari, and Braidotti all see nomadism as an active practice, which is possible in both philosophy and art, and in other areas of life.

As mentioned before, the modulation of the algorithmic culture has a material limit. The practices I am proposing do not erase the materiality of gameplay, but rather tap into different kinds of materialities. When traveling in intensity and engaging in speed rather than in movement, the limits of actions inside the game world are no longer of concern. In other words, nomadic attitude to counterplay is more a philosophical than an operational practice and, as such, relevant for developing a different approach to game studies.

As *Minecraft* is all about building and establishing locations of virtual residence, wandering around aimlessly can be seen as a means of counterplay. If I start *Minecraft* in "Survival mode" in the easiest setting possible, "Peaceful", I will face no enemies nor will I die of hunger. This means that there is nothing I need to do or avoid – the only exception is falling from a place high enough for the blow to be lethal – in order to keep existing in the world (Figure 11.1).
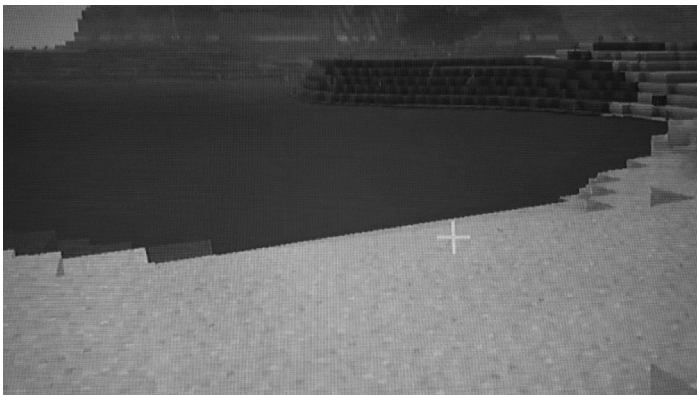

Figure 11.1 Wandering.[2]

When the players choose to exist in a wandering state, they refuse to stop and claim ownership of the possible wonders and quirks they encounter. This is obliviously a goal in itself, but one that resists the basic hierarchies provided within the gameplay ideals. Leaving things behind can be a challenging practice, at least in my own experience. When I encounter a village full of non-player-characters or a temple rising in the middle of a jungle, a part of me wishes to claim some kind of ownership or to acquire a lasting memory of that place. However, there is nothing to possess or acquire; the fleeting moments spent inside the game leave material mementos within the game, but they tend not to be accessible to the player and their materiality. This acceptance of the impossibility of colonialism and, thus, power, can be considered one of the possible radical implications of counterplay.

Remaining in immobility is the other form of counterplay I have practiced on my adventures. This means that the player spawns to the world and then remains immobile. The avatar does not do or accomplish anything, and neither does the player. This results in something that can be described as traveling in intensity. I, both my physical body and my avatar's, engage in active nothingness, active non-movement that still resonates with speed. Intensity is traveling in place. We choose not to engage in movement and, thus, choose not to deliver the expected behavior. This tactic pushes Nakamura's and Wirman's "peaceful pac" to the extreme (Figure 11.2).

Both of these practices set the player against the inherent colonialism of the game: my objective is no longer to expand, own, and possess. In fact, I no longer have an objective. Thus, this approach is the refusal to succumb to the logic of capitalism. As all means of counterplay, these as well are provided to the player by the game and its mechanics. However, these practices cannot be absorbed or capitalized on by the game company – there are no added value or innovations present here. The intensity produced in the player in cooperation with nonhumanity around them is all that it is.
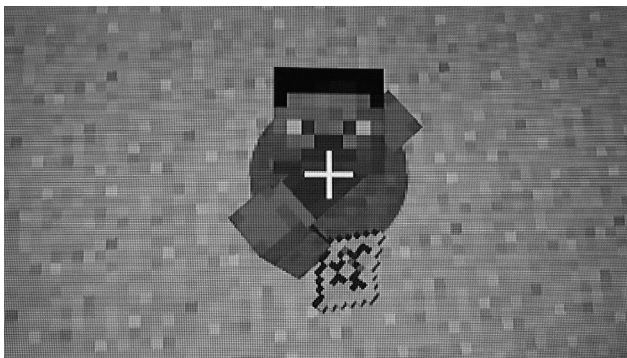

Figure 11.2 Traveling in intensity.

A nomadic way of playing, of remaining in immobility can be a way to engage in resistance and in counterplay. When both, the player and the avatar, remain in fixed locations, the prospects for the future change radically.

Conclusion

> The thing is, there's only six sides to a block.
>
> Direwolf20

This chapter has pieced together a picture of gameplay – especially that of *Minecraft* – as a rhizome of human and nonhuman co-agencies affecting our brains and our bodies. Practices of colonialism, conquest, and possession intertwine with immersive pleasure during gameplay, thus strengthening and enforcing harmful, capitalist, and anthropocentric power structures. To challenge these processes, I have introduced some tactics of counterplay practices by Nakamura, Wirman, and Apperley, and then expanded the concept with my own examples from *Minecraft*.

The force of these practices lies in the refusal of the player to be subjected as a vehicle of capitalist dreams of expansion. My interpretation of counterplay is that it is a philosophical practice, which extends outside mere gameplay. In other words, taking passive actions and engaging in resistance in videogames are bound to have an effect on the player also in other situations. Acknowledging one's position in the hierarchy helps to undermine and deconstruct it. It is also crucial to see other agencies and materialities affecting the player.

Doing nothing is, however, still a choice, and a choice is always a question of internality that somewhat dismisses other agencies despite their influence on me. The choice here restores the hierarchy in favor of the human: it makes room for oppression of the other. The power of capitalism is to restore human rule, ensure that the human – and a very certain kind of human – stays on the top of the hierarchy. Counterplay might not be able to abolish hierarchies, but it can make them visible.

The absence of plan and destination in my examples of counterplay is set against the logic of capitalism, however brief these moments of resistance may be. The possibility for the subject to choose such an approach, one that acts or at least tries to act outside a possessive and destructive ideology, is indeed a contested one. The notion of the end of the history, of current *status quo* as the best and final one is hard to overcome. Cultural and artistic practices are, however, keys to resistance, as they approach the question through pleasure and play instead of pain and gain.

Notes

1 All the quotes are from the same discussion thread on *Minecraft* Forum. In the thread, players invented their own *Minecraft*-related quotes.
2 All the images are screenshots from *Minecraft* taken by the author and used under fair use according to Digital Games Research Association guidelines.

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PUBLICATION
II

Playing is Performing: Video Games as Performance

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Playing is Performing – Video Games as Performance

Introduction

Performing arts and playing video games are both forms of human creativity. They are also a form leisure, a way of expression and part of economic structures. They offer a position for both the performer and the audience. Further, both playing and performing are processes, which do not in most cases produce any material products. An artistic performance ends, and player reaches an end in the game, but the enjoyment depends on the process. Both activities are about the journey, not the destination per se.

Performing arts and games in general build upon play as a human activity (Huizinga 1980; Schechner 1988; Caillois 2001). Despite the common heritage, video games and performing arts have radically different positions or roles in the mediatized society of today. Performing arts – for example theatre, opera or ballet – still enjoy the place as "high culture", whereas video games are seen as popular culture, more as products than as works of art[1]. Video games have grown to be one the defining phenomena of the 21st century. Along with the digitalization of the society, video games grow in importance: they are part of education, leisure, sports, health and work (WePC 2019; Techopedia 2019).

The aim of this article is to establish ways gameplay can be seen as performance. I will briefly examine the concept of performance by going through writings of performance scholars, including Marvin Carlson (2004), Richard Schechner (1988), and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008). The aim is to pinpoint the defining characteristics of performance, especially on relation to video games as an activity. Next, I will present a definition of video games as performance, by matching the characteristics of performance with the action of gameplay. I will offer five different perspectives on video games as performance and as part of performance. This divide is not definite, but shows us different sides of both human-game-interaction and performance as a medium. These perspectives

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[1] There is a lot of discussion on whether or not video games can be seen as art, and if they are art, are they art through interpretation or intention. The definition of art is always changing, and video games as a relatively new form are reforming that definition. For a summary see Deardorff 2015.

range from the usage of video games as a prop or additional media resource in conventional theatre to gameplay as performative activity. The aim is to extend the concept of gameplay through performance theory. The frame of performance is a playful attitude, which shifts the gaze from stories to actions by emphasizing performance's processual nature.

The categories suggested in this article are to be taken with a playful mindset. The main question is how to understand playing video games as performance and creative, artistic practice? In his book *Postdramatic Theatre,* Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) has described the shift in performance from "traditional" theatre towards postdramatic theatre as "more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information" (Lehmann 2006, p. 85). Lehmann's work is based on theatre, but these qualities resonate also with video games and especially with gameplay. Performance research has not yet been thoroughly explored as a method for analyzing video games[2]. By expanding the notion of what counts as performance this article does its part in filling the gap in research.

Video games can be played in a variety of ways. In this article I focus on playing as leisure activity. This will rule out educational games and E-Sports. The main reason is that these types of games or gameplay situations already have another strong reference point – learning, competition or even work. They have a purpose other than gameplay, and as such they are ruled out of the zone of artistic performance in this article.

What is performance?

Performance is a contested concept, which varies in meaning depending on the field of use. Performance studies sees performance as something that exceeds the field of theatre or other performing arts: in a nutshell performance research is research of actions.

According to theatre scholar Marvin Carlson, performance has three definitions: *the display of skills, patterned behavior,* and *keeping up the standard* (Carlson 1996, pp. 2-5). *Display of skills* means literally consciously showing off someone's – or something's – skills. This can mean anything from actor to opera singer, from an athlete to a gamer, from a barista to a lion tamer. *Patterned behavior*

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[2] Works combining performance theory and video games do exist, however they are still rare. Few examples: performance theory has been suggested as a structural tool for analyzing video games (Fernández-Vara 2009); avatars have been discussed as puppets (Westecott 2009) ; gameplay events have been experienced as site-specific performance (Westerside & Holopainen 2019); and roleplaying games have been discussed as performative (Hoover, Simkins, Deterding, Meldman & Brown 2018; Montola 2009; Stenros 2010).

means behavior that is distanced from the person doing it. Taking on a role of another person – acting – is a prime example of this. According to Carlson patterned behavior is what distinguishes performance from "real life" (1996, p. 4). Performance scholar Richard Schechner talks about restored behavior. He includes all human behavior that separates the activity from the person doing it under this category. This means theatre, rituals, shamanism or adapting any kind of role (Schechner 1981, p. 2).[3] The frame of performance transforms the activity: on stage something is performed, while outside of the stage it is merely done (Carlson 1996, p. 4). Performance is by nature something that can be repeated, yet it is never exactly the same performance it was before. *Keeping up the standard* refers to the quality of something. We talk about sexual performance, linguistic performance, academic performance, engine performance, software performance, company performance – the list goes on. Here the audience judges the quality of the performance based on generalized level of success. (Carlson 1996, p. 4)

To dig a little deeper into the concept of performance we turn to Richard Schechner. Schechner lists five nominators that are common to forms of performance: play, games, sports, theatre and ritual. These are "1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4 rules" and 5) special place to perform these activities in. (Schechner 1988, p.6) I will go through these five nominators later.

According to performance scholar Erica Fischer-Lichte, the defining characteristic of performance is transformativity. Fischer-Lichte writes:

> By transforming its participants, performance achieves the reenchantment of the world. The nature of performance as event – articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emergence of meaning – enables such transformation. Theatre and performance art since the 1960s have repeatedly demonstrated a peculiar interest in playing with and reflecting on these constitutive conditions of performance and its inter-related processes of transformation. In consequence, we have begun to understand these conditions as inherent to all performance, regardless of its genre or historical placement. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p.181)

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[3] As we all have different social roles and we are, at least to some extent, aware of them, all human activity can be considered performative. See e.g. Goffman 1990.

This transformation happens through the liminal experience made possible by all types of performance. The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators builds performance: breaking boundaries, shifting roles, and crumbling dichotomies enable liminal experiences. This can mean the transformation of people's place in the society, the position of the spectator switching to the one of the actor, things turning to something else as first perceived. The performative turn – the dissolution of boundaries – in arts is used to describe the shift in the paradigm of how art is received and produced. According to Fischer-Lichte there is no longer an independent work of art, but rather "an event that involves everybody". (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 18) Fischer-Lichte sees performance as a possibility to see the world as reenchanted:

> …encourages them to enter into a new relationship with themselves and the world. This relationship is not determined by an "either/or" situation but by an "as well as." The reenchantment of the world is inclusive rather than exclusive; it asks everyone to act in life as in performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 207)

As we can see performance is a concept that covers all human – possibly also non-human[4] – activity. It is noteworthy that though all of the scholars discussed come from the field of theatre or performance research, the definitions of the concept extend beyond the field of theatre or even art as a general category. Schechner, Carlson and Fischer-Lichte see performance as something that is present in all aspects of life and in the workings of our societies. Shannon Jackson (2004) summarizes the concept – and the discussion around it as follows:

> In sum, performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real. (Jackson 2004, p. 15)

Common factors of videogames and performing arts

This article pinpoints ways video games can be seen in relation to performing arts, performance art, and in some cases, to theatre especially. Next, I will go though some structural similarities, which tie together all activities categorized as performance. These include the five nominators from Schechner, as well other relevant qualities. Performance theory in general does include play and games as human activities, and video games are no exception, even though they are not directly mentioned.

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[4] See for example Kirkkopelto (2017).

Temporality

One of the defining qualities of performance has been the notion of time. Every single artistic performance happens only once in a specific place at a specific time. Performance is ongoing: it is processual by nature. Because it only exists in the present moment, it rarely produces any material products: it is a process and not a thing. If a performance has more than one show, every single one is different to all the others. Performance cannot be repeated. It can be done again, but every single repetition is a new action.[5] (Phelan 1993; Fischer-Lichte 2008)

Gameplay operates essentially the same way. All actions of the (human) player are done in a specific physical space during a specific moment in time. Even when the player is forced to repeat a sequence of gameplay, – a hard boss fight, an impossible jump – the actions are always different from the previous time. The player changes – position, feelings, cells, fluids, stomach content, and expressions – as does the space and the relation between the game and the player. Video games are generally purchasable or downloadable products, but gameplay is a process. Gameplay does leave marks of what has happened: scores, save files and memories, but gameplay itself cannot be stored. We can of course save screenshots and video material of gameplay, but it is not gameplay that is saved, it is the mere documentation of it. Gameplay happens always in the moment.

According to Richard Schechner there are three major varieties of performance time. *Event time* is the time during which the event should or must be completed, regardless of the time span. This means for example the duration of a sports match, a rain dance, or the length of a rehearsed performance. *Set time* means the predefined time that an event should last, whether or not the activity has been completed. It includes football, basketball and all the games in which the aim is to score points in restricted time. Last, *symbolic time,* describes the difference between the actual time span and

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[5] Shannon Jackson summarizes the problematics of repeated or patterned behavior and the non-repeatable nature of performance: "To many scholars, performance's repeatability has been fundamental to its theorizing, whether couched in Richard Schechner's restoration of behavior, derived from Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody, or echoed in Judith Butler's adaptation of Derridean citationality. While such scholars have been quick to add that repetition occasionally entails variation and difference, their point of entry differs markedly from that of Peggy Phelan who argues for performance as fundamentally non-repeatable, as a reiteration whose chief feature is its non-reproducibility. Competing associations revolve around other performance registers, further confounding the quest for theoretical purity. For some philosophers, performance is an intentional realm of purposive action; for others, it is an unintentional realm of spontaneous or habitual enactment. Some theorists, spurred by recent cultural theory, link performance to innovative realms of creation and resistance; others, reproducing new versions of older Platonic condemnations, link performance to derivative realms of conformity and tertiary imitation. Finally, the occupants of many theatre departments use a language of the actual, the real, and the authentic to distinguish their practices of artistic production from a presumably "less real" practice of scholarly research. (Jackson 2004, p. 14)

representational time span. For example, an event that would take hours in real life can be over in seconds on stage or in a game. This is common in theatre, rituals, and play and games. (Schechner 1988, pp. 6-8) Video games use all of the above time modes: event time can refer to the time the player needs to be able to complete objectives of the game (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 2); set time to any game where the player has to do something in a tight time frame; and symbolic time usually passes in games that have some sort of narrative and a world, for example in *Minecraft* the day and night pass with their own specific pace.

Things

Performance can be defined through a special relation to objects. According to Schechner, objects in everyday life gain their value through practicality (tools), rareness and beauty (gold, art), transactional power (physical money), or age. In performance context, objects which may hold no significant value become important. For example, balls or other sport equipment are indispensable during sports events, props and costumes create symbolic realities in theatre and child's play. (Schechner 1988, p. 9) In video game context, virtual objects gain their value from the effect they have in the game. For example, health potions help the player survive, or the player might need some specific items to reach places (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 2). To summarize in Schechner's words: "The 'otherworldliness' of play, sports, games, theater, and ritual is enhanced by the extreme disparity between the value of the objects outside the activity when compared to their value as foci of the activity" (Schechner 1988, p. 9).

Rules

Rules define the activity: football played in school yard is the same game as the one played in the *Champions League*. What changes is the scale and the quality. If the rules change, they change usually globally, but adjustments can be made in the local level. Mischief, bribes and similar forms of outside influence may occur, but they are recognized as something that is against what should be. Schechner writes: "the rules are designed not only to tell the players how to play but to *defend the activity against encroachment from the outside.*" (1988, p. 11) What applies to sports and games[6] applies to all performance activities: traditions shape rituals, and conventions define theater, dance and music. Rules set these activities apart from the daily life, rules create the magic circle in each of these cases. (Schechner 1988, pp. 10-11)

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[6] For a thorough summary on definitions of rules in relation to games see Montola (2009).

Nonproductivity

Third common factor mentioned by Schechner is "the separation of performance activities from productive work" (1988, p. 9). This notion – previously attached to play by Johan Huizinga (1980) and Roger Caillois (2001) – is for Schechner the most unifying and interesting one. As game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara points out, this is debatable (cf. 2009, pp. 2-3). Professionals earn money in theatre, sports or e-sports, or any other form of performance. In certain videogames players develop characters and sell them to other players, thus making real profit from virtual world[7]. One might however argue that these profits are made from arrangements and structures surrounding the actual performance. The profit comes, for example in the case of theatre, from the people who want see it. In other words, the profit is tied to the spectatorship. The same goes for sports: not everyone who plays football gets paid, neither does everyone who is brilliant in *Counter-Strike* (2000-). The money is tied to sponsors, game companies and venues, in short is tied to audience and customers. Non-productivity means that performance does not produce anything of material value outside its own context. The performance itself remains unproductive.

Space

Performance space or the magic circle[8] describes the shared space in which the rules of performance are valid. The space might be designed for the purpose, like a temple, stadium or theatre, (Schechner 1988, p. 11) or it might emerge from the performance, like in the case of street theatre or game of football in the park. (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 3) In video games this space extends from the virtual to the physical, as the players' actions in the virtual world are created through the physical bodies and devices. According to Fernández-Vara this double position both in and out makes the players both performers and spectators. (2009, p. 3) The performance space of videogames expands even more, if we look at online games. The in-space is shared by the players in the same game or same area of the game, and outside spaces might be scattered around the globe. What connects them is the game, the process, the performance.

Liveness

Theatre has been seen as the art of presence, bodily co-presence that creates the autopoietic feedback loop, as Fischer-Lichte describes (2008, pp. 38-39). This quality has been considered as the base of the experience in for example, theater: the thing happens right there and right now. However theatre

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[7] *World of Warcraft* (2004) is a great example of this. See Itstillworks (2017)
[8] See Montola (2009) for a thorough summary.

has utilized technology from the very start of its history, and has adapted new technologies readily (Salter 2010, pp. xxi-xxiii). "Technology is integral to the history of performance. […] Performance is integral to the history of technology" as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distils (1999). From deus ex machina to moving stage sets, from microphones to live streamed videos. Often the use of new technology has sparked discussion of realness or authenticity of the performance. Similar discussions center now around live and prerecorded video as a medium of traditional theatrical performance. Any performance – concert, competition, ritual – can be streamed live across the globe, and it can viewed both in the exact moment and as a recording. Fischer-Lichte notes that

> A new dichotomy has emerged between live performance constituted by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and spectators and the autopoietic feedback loop and mediatized performances which sever the co-existence of production and reception. Mediatized performance invalidates the feedback loop. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 68)

However, in the case of gameplay the feedback loop is not severed. The interaction between the game and the player are live, they happen exactly then, as the computer runs the program based on the players. Also in online games other human players are present in the same virtual space exactly at the same moment, even if their bodies are located somewhere else. Video game characters can be categorized as "virtual puppets", in contrast to the "tangible puppets" used in traditional puppetry (Kaplin 1995, pp. 37-39). Puppetry has been defined by the real-time manipulation of the puppet, which has then excluded for example animated characters in movies from the realm of puppetry (Tillis 1999, pp. 183-184). However, in the event of gameplay the player is manipulating the avatar, the virtual puppet in real-time. The avatar probably has pre-animated gestures and actions, but the player is responsible for making them visible during gameplay.

The more complex, interactive and real-time technology becomes, the more difficult it is to distinguish live from non-live. Philip Auslander (2006 p. 527) has said that for example early music recordings did not spark conversation on liveness, as they were easily distinguishable as exactly what they were: recordings. Digital and virtual technologies open the discussion on what is and should be considered live. Auslander uses chatterbots as an example of a virtual entities that create content in interaction with humans. Codes operating those bots are made by humans, but Auslander looks at the phenomena from performance perspective: chatterbots (and other interactive entities) shift the discussion to the ontology of the performer. Even though chatterbots are technological entities, they produce rather than reproduce. (Auslander 2006, pp. 529-531) This applies to video games as well:

in many games the other characters and even the game itself reacts to actions of the player. Auslander concludes:

> The ability to present performances that can be watched as they occur, or, to switch to a technological vocabulary, to perform in real time – the heart of the concept of liveness – is an ability shared by human beings and chatterbots. The appearance of the Internet chatterbot therefore does not occasion a redefinition of liveness or a realignment of the conceptual relationship between live and recorded performances, as did the earlier development of radio. But what the chatterbot does occasion is considerably more profound: it undermines the idea that live performance is a specifically human activity; it subverts the centrality of the live, organic presence of human beings to the experience of live performance; and it casts into doubt the existential significance attributed to live performance. (Auslander 2006, p. 531)

Audience

As discussed before, the presence of the human body has been seen as an integral part of performance. This usually has meant both the body of the performer and that of the audience member/audience. The same divide is compatible with the gameplay event, although the materiality of the bodies might be a little different.

A situation where one or more humans play a game and one or more watch would be analogous with the traditional theatre situation. The situation changes somewhat, if the player is alone in the room. They might be still watched by other human players, for example in many online games. The other might be engaged in the activity with "our" player, or they might be just witnessing the events as a passive audience. In any case they share the virtual space. The performance is thus mediated, but nonetheless live. This can be compared to a theatrical performance in which the actors perform via video from a different space.

What if our player plays a single person game alone? The audience is first person audience. First person audience is something that happens when the performer and the audience are the same person. In these cases the performance is finished in the mind of the spectator, and others participating can only access their own side of the performance. This type of performance is in the center of live action

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role playing, LARPing. In LARPs the players usually play on two stages, that of their mind and that which is visible to other players as well. (Stenros 2010, pp. 300-303)

The audience can also be non-human. Gameplay experience is always connected to various other entities other than the human alone. These entities include pixels, machinery, code, and everything else that is connected to the event of gameplay. (Huuhka 2019, p.221)

Agency

What happens when someone plays video games? That someone is engaged in a physical, bodily activity. Regardless of the mode of interacting with the interface – hands, feet, full body, gaze, or voice – the player is using their body (Parisi 2010, p. 116). The player is interacting with some sort of virtual environment. That environment may or may not strive to resemble something familiar to the player; important about that environment is that is exits for the player. My main focus in this article is on the performative agency of the player(s). Performative agency is not limited to the human player. As we approach the gameplay situation as a performance, we can see that a player does not act alone. Their actions are affected by others, both human and non-humans, entangled in the system in question. (Huuhka 2019, pp. 221-223; Giddins 2005, p. 119)

Video Games as Performance – Five Approaches

I have divided video games as performance into five different categories. Each category has a slightly different approach to both performance and to video games. All gameplay is performance, but all performance is not homogenous. We understand performance in theatre and performance in a social situation as different types of performance. The same applies to the categories presented here. I have chosen categories that can be understood as artistic practices. Further, all of them are deliberate: they have been planned and organized as performances. In addition I have focused mostly on gameplay as performance, though there are exceptions. I have left out some cases of gameplay as performance. As explained previously, the three definitions of performance – display of skills, keeping up the standard and patterned behavior – can be used to describe very varied aspects of human activity. For example, striving to beat a high score in an arcade game is performance in all the mentioned ways, yet it is not necessarily meant as an artistic performance.

Examples in this article are all from situations, where the actions are framed as performance by the performers themselves. This outline not only allows the analysis of said performances, but also offers

a short guidebook for the performers themselves.   How to perform with games and by gaming/playing?

First Approach – Video Games as an Aesthetic Resource

This category is firmly based on the "conventional" theatre and performing arts. By this, I mean that video games are used as an added medium, or an aesthetic resource. A video of a game might be used to mark a specific era, or video game imagery might represent some atmospheric notes. For example, in a theatrical performance, a video of a first person shooter might mark violent behavior, or some fast-paced game might be used to represent the problematics of being human in postmodern capitalism.

Theatre and technology have always been intertwined: in metaphors, in stage design, in the orderings and instructions of the stage, actors and the whole event (Salter 2010, p. xxi). Against this shared history, video games are just another technological invention entangled in the assemblage of theatre and performance. This category has little to do with playing or gaming, but it does reflect the importance of games in our society. Video games have large audiences, and as mass produced commodities and cultural objects they portray shared history. In short, video games can be used as any other cultural reference, either as a representation of something, marker of something, or just for pure aesthetic pleasure.

To summarize: gameplay described here is utilized as a prop, as a mark of games in general. In this sense gameplay here is not performative, but rather supporting the performance.

Second Approach – Video Games as a structural category

Video games – or games in general – as a structural idea is something that is fairly common in what is called "immersive theatre". Rose Biggin (2017) describes immersive theatre as follows:

> I draw from philosophical aesthetics, cognitive science and computer games
> to define immersive *experience* as a graded, fleeting, intense and necessarily
> temporary state defined by an awareness of its temporal and spatial
> boundaries. Immersive theatre, then, is a genre of theatrical work in which
> certain audience configurations might be expected, but in which immersive
> experience itself can only be allowed for, not guaranteed. (Biggin 2017, p. 1)

The audience usually are actors in situations where they make choices, and the choices directly affect the narrative of the performance. Artist Group Blast Theory's *Black Antler* (2016) positioned the spectator as an undercover agent, whose mission was to infiltrate a right wing extremist group. In the performance the spectator was pushed into uncomfortable and threatening situations, even if the whole situation was fiction. (Blast Theory 2019) Immersive theatre can be used as a form of activism (Dinesh 2019), or as a way having fun, like in Joseph O'Farrell's *10 Minute Dance Parties* (JOFmakesART). Immersive theatre has a lot in common with live action role playing games or LARPs[9], where the player plays their character within the guidelines provided by the game's writers.

Performances in this category are something that might be described as game-like, immersive or interactive. They give the spectator a possibility to influence, or at least feel they can influence the events. In other words, they offer the possibility of agency. They also offer the possibility to be immersed, to experience the fictional reality around differently from traditional theatre.

Third Approach – Performances Staged Inside Video Games

Performances staged inside video games are usually something that player communities´ stage, or sometimes what the game company wants to offer for loyal gamers. For example, EDM artist Marshmello has held concerts in *Fortnite* (2017). Both the artist and the audience are present through their avatars, and communicate by dancing[10].

The rules of the game also usually change in these situations. For example, it would not be acceptable to attack or kill other characters during this event. In the case of *Fortnite*, the venue only allows players to carry out certain moves or emotes, mainly ones that are suitable for dancing. The players do not thus have the possibility to, for example, use weapons on others. However, the rules also change to comply with the situation. I believe most players attending such an event follow generic rules of how to behave in a concert, as can be observed from recordings of those concerts. The rules of behavior are of course subjected to the logic of the virtual world: the audience can, for example, jump higher than the stage. The event has its own performance space, its own magic circle.

Here is a great example of the transformative power of performance. An arena of competition and virtual violence becomes an arena of celebration and peaceful co-existence. The main reason for this

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[9] See for example Stenros 2010; Montola 2010.
[10] Marshmello has published this concert in their YouTube (2019) account:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBsCzN-jfvA

is of course the presence of virtual Marshmello, but moreover it is the framing of the situation as that of artistic performance conceptually, but most likely by limiting the available movements and items.

Years ago, I used to play *Lord of the Rings Online* aka LOTRO (2007), in which people regularly organized concerts in various locations around Middle Earth. Players would post notices on virtual notice boards, inviting people to come to a certain location at a certain time. There they would play their instruments, and other players would watch. Here the frame of performance transforms the space from space of travel to space of staying. The game consists of quests related to the J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) storyline and its imagined expansions, and usually people just scurry around completing quests and generally minding their own business. A staged, preannounced performance legitimizes the different interactions and modes of sharing space with others. This also sometimes happened in spaces such as taverns, where people would impromptu perform for other present players. I have not played other similar MMORPGs[11], but I assume similar practices are found in other games as well.

In a nutshell: the frame of performance transforms the space and the players in it. Players create new rules, which may differ from the rules of the game world, like in the case of Marshmello by bringing something of the real world to the virtual world. Or, like in the case of LOTRO, the performance deepens the structure of the world by bringing events that might be real. In any case, different framing alters behavior and the performance time.

Fourth Approach – Performances Made with Video Games

To this category, I put performances that are made using video games as medium and also as performers. This category partly overlaps with the prior, but it has its own specific details and characteristics. First, the game is not a prop, but rather in the center of the performance. Second, the performances don't take place inside the fictional or virtual world, as in the previous category. Rather, they take place on the border of virtual and actual. Third, the human performers are acting alongside the machinic and virtual performers. Fourth, the games are often used in ways that have little do to with traditional gameplay.

I have organized workshops, where the students have been asked to create performances using video games. The main goal of the workshops has been to look at video games as medium that can be used

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[11] massive multiplayer online role playing game

in different ways, but also as fellow performers. A performance of this category might have some qualities from all the previous ones, or none. A game may be used to tell a story that is unrelated to the game itself. I have for example seen *The Lord of the Rings* performed by using football game *FIFA 2018*.[12] The performers played with one team as the Fellowship of the Ring, and the other as the forces of Sauron. The ball was the ring, and the story was told by narrating the gameplay following loosely the plot of the book. The game here is not a prop, but more of an extension of the performance space. As Fernández-Vara mentions, the space of performance extends from the virtual to the physical world (2009, p. 3).

If we think about the qualities of performance, Fischer-Lichte's transformativity is key. Changing the context from gameplay to artistic performance changes not only the position of the player but also that of the audience. The audience directs their gaze to things that are usually of no interest to someone watching someone else play. The player is transformed into a performer, the meanings attached to the things in the game change to something different.

Fifth Approach – Gameplay as performance

The last category is gameplay as performance. This approach includes multiple meanings, as does the concept, but I am most interested in gameplay as an artistic process.

First, we must forget the narratives and the meanings: we must explore gameplay as postdramatic (cf. Lehmann 2006). Video games are works of art in their own right, and as such they can be enjoyed by looking and exploring, or whatever the designers have had in mind. However, to be able to grasp the artistic performance in gameplay, we should leave the art of the game in the background, to treat it as a setting for the action. The attention should be directed to the player, and the interaction between the player, the game, and the game device.

When we think about for example the environment of a certain video game, the first intuition would be to see it as some sort of a representation of a world or a fictional world. For example, in a first person shooter game the representation could be of a city block on a war zone or abandoned industrial complex. When shifting the focus beyond representation to actual presence, we might notice that the pixels do not really represent anything. They exist as themselves, and as assemblages arranged in

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[12] This happened in Performing Gameplay course in Tampere University. This course was a part of my ongoing PhD research project.

certain ways. By this, I mean that a tree in a virtual world does not merely represent a tree, but rather it is a virtual tree in a virtual world.

Representation has the quality of making absent the thing it wants to make visible. A virtual tree, when seen as representation, cries out the absence of a tree. It is nothing more than a sign for something that is not reachable. However if accepted for what it is, a virtual tree, a cluster of pixels, it becomes present. (States 1985, pp. 8-12) This question of presence affects the whole experience of playing. Gameplay is situation in which the player or players create action together with the game devices and virtual environments (Giddins 2005; **Waldrich 2020, p. 183).** The process is deeply rooted in the body of the player (Parisi 2010, p 112).

Usually video games are seen as a representation of "the real world": the avatars and the things are meant to portray things and characters of physical form. However, the reality of a fictional world is more – or probably actually less – complicated. Fictional world is what it is – a fictional, virtual world and not a representation of anything. For example, the world of *Minecraft* (2009) is not a representation of an actual, physical Earth. It is a fictional, virtual world made of pixelated blocks. It has its own laws of gravity and physics, its own time system and own aesthetic.

What a player does is use the device – controller, keyboard, mobile – to operate in the virtual world. The device transfers the movements into movements in a different dimension. The movements of the player are not representational. They are what they are: moving buttons with fingers. The movement is then transferred to the game, but as something else: the movement in the game is not a mirror image of the movement of the player. Take the example of *Minecraft*: the player presses a certain button and the avatar moves its pixelated limb holding a pixelated tool. This action might look like something that would also happen in a certain situation in the human world, but it looks more like something that happens in a virtual world. There is connection, but the connection is tied to the narrative of the game: the action and its representational aspects come clear through the story and setting of the game. For example, early low-resolution games formed actions and objects from a limited number of pixels. To distinguish an immobile five-pixel snake from an immobile five-pixel stick the player would need the guidance of the narrative and cultural context.

This means that dropping the narrative opens a different game world. Things might be recognizable, but without the narrative aspect, they lose their representational relationship. The player is dealing with the actual virtual environment as it is. The aim is to see the actions in the game world not as

shadows of something, but as actions in their own right. A virtual tool is a virtual tool, not a poor representation of the "actual" one – a virtual reality is a distinct, unique reality. Gameplay as performance happens when the player deliberately abandons the objectives and narratives of the game, and starts to use the game in a new way. Here also the frame of performance transforms the relations of the player and the game.

One way to approach gameplay as performance is through the concept of performance art. In the field of contemporary performance research performance artists often contemplate on the shift from ordinary to art. Finnish performance artist Pilvi Porkola (2015) writes that for her ordinary things, for example objects, gain their art or performance quality through gaze, distance and context. In her example the action of looking at a teacup transforms into performance when it is framed as performance. (2015, p. 354) Hence, art is what we frame as art. Porkola's teacup is only one example of performance art as the wondering of everyday things, events and phenomena. Same kind of attitude also transforms our actions in videogame. Regardless of the presence or absence of outside spectator(s), if we decide to base our actions on artistic intentions, they are art. And, as every action is done in the moment, it is performance.

For my PhD thesis, I conducted pieces of performance art inside *Minecraft*. They were autoethnographic explorations into the environment and the conventions of the environment. I would for example stand still in one place for an hour, letting the virtual time pass around my avatar. These kinds of actions alter the reality of the game: by refusing to comply with the stimuli, the dynamic of the world changes from active to passive. The frame of performance transforms the space. (Huuhka 2019, pp. 230-232) Performance alters the flow of time. Usually gameplay is full of sensory stimuli to keep the player immersed in gameplay, often losing touch of the "real" time. Standing still refusing the stimuli kicks the player/performer out of the symbolic time of the game into the event time of the performance. Performance is what stays after the predetermined actions melt away.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to explore similarities between video games and performances, and to expand the notion of artistic performance to gameplay. Presented approaches can be used in the production and analysis of video game performance, or as a way to perceive any gameplay situation as performative. In my ongoing PhD research project I have two sets of research data on video game performance: autoethnographic performative explorations and two workshops on performance and gameplay, in the University of Konstanz (2017) and in the Tampere University (2019). Materials

have been documented by videos, screenshots and diaries. The future research will analyze specific performances in more detail based on the approaches presented here.

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PUBLICATION
III

Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops

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Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops

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ABSTRACT

This article examines performances produced in two Performing Gameplay workshops in 2017 and 2019. These performances are labeled as intermedial, as they were produced by using video games alongside live performers. The aim is to explore the changes frame of performance causes in players and games, as well as in performances, performers, and spectators. The article focuses on two main themes: the transformative process from gameplay to performance, and vice versa; and the significance of non-human participants in this process.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on two workshops/courses held at the University of Konstanz, Germany, in Spring 2017 (from now on workshop K) and at Tampere University, Finland, in Spring 2019 (from now on workshop T).[1] Workshop K was a part of a Spring School course for Theoretical Media and Arts Studies. The course was an introductory course to game studies, and the participants were mostly literature and media studies students. Workshop T was a course titled *Performing Gameplay* for Internet and Game Studies students. I devised workshop T based on my experiences during workshop K. Both workshops were inspired by my ongoing practice-based PhD project in which I explore performance as a method in creating counterplay.[2]

During these two workshops, the students/performers produced 31 separate performances: in workshop K 10 and workshop T 21. As all performances were produced using physical space around the participants, and the medium of video games, they are categorized here as intermedial or live media performances. My hypothesis for this article is that performance[3] as a frame transforms gameplay into something different. What changes occur in the assemblages of players and games, and on the other hand, of performances and spectators?

For this article, I have picked two themes that were present in most of the performances. I do not focus on the content of the performances, but rather on the actions of the performers and the presence of the audience. This approach allows for a deeper analysis of structures and helps to create a more detailed account of what exactly does the frame of performance do in the context of gameplay.

The first theme is the transformation from gameplay and watching gameplay to performing and watching performances. The shift happens through the actions and attitudes of the participants, both performers, and spectators: it alters the way actions are perceived and performed. This question includes the notion of the audience. As gameplay transforms into performance, the previous divide between player and spectator changes as new agential positions, such as the pixel-spectator and the human-performer, emerge.

Second, I will discuss the role of the nonhumans, both as performers and as the audience. Framing these actions as performance allows the gaze to focus on previously overlooked agencies, which tend to be taken for granted in, for example, video game context. This approach also discusses the shift from the human body to the nonhuman body. To what extent the nonhumans, avatars, for example, are extensions of humans, and to what extend they might be having agency themselves? If we take the non-human participants, both performers and spectators seriously, alternative ways of thinking gameplay and our relationship to it are opened.

GAMEPLAY AS PERFORMANCE

INTERMEDIAL PERFORMANCE

According to performance scholar Erica Fischer-Lichte, performance reenchants the world by transforming its participants. This transformation is enabled by the nature of the performance event, which includes the bodies of both performers and spectators, emergent meanings, and performative generation of materiality (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Transformation is a liminal experience consisting of shifting boundaries, crumbling dichotomies, and breaking boundaries (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

As all the performances in workshop K and workshop T used video games in some manner, it is important to establish them as intermedial and/or live media performances. Intermedial performances are performances that use different media in their production, and during which those media are somehow redefined. Intermediality is about diversity rather than unity, it is collage or montage rather than a total work of art (Kattenbelt 2010: 35). Intermedial performance can be 'both physically based and on-screen; experiences may be both actual

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1   Permission to discuss workshops K and T has been obtained from the students and/or the universities in question.

2   For definitions of counterplay see for example Nakamura & Wirman 2005, Apperley 2010, Huuhka 2019.

3   'Performance' in this article is used mainly to describe artistic performance and performance theory. Uses of 'performance' as technical performance or, for example, gamers efficiency during gameplay are defined in the text.

and virtual; spaces may be both public and private; bodies may be both present and absent' (Nelson 2010: 17). Chiel Kattenbelt summarizes:

> My aim is to emphasise the performativity of intermediality by arguing that intermediality is very much about the staging (in the sense of conscious self-presentation to another) of media, for which theatre as a hypermedium provides pre-eminently a stage. (Kattenbelt 2010: 29)

The intermedial approach thus allows experiencing other media, such as video games in this article through the paradigm of theatre.

To deepen the concept of intermedial performance, I will add Grayson Cooke's idea of live media performance. Examples of this type of performance are VJing, live cinema, expanded cinema, and live coding, to name just a few (Cooke 2010; Scott 2015). Cooke has pointed out that live media performance is a difficult and under-examined genre, as it exists between the modes of production and performance, always in between (Cooke 2010: 194). According to Cooke, live media performances happen in 'real time', they are live and happen in the moment. Even though humans are involved in the process, they operate on a temporality that differs from the human intention. This means that there are always things that remain beyond human control. For example, in performances including generative algorithms, certain conditions are set, but the emergent performance has not been intended to play out exactly as it does. (Cooke 2010: 200–201) Live media performance is thus always unscripted and unpredictable.

I have chosen to include intermediality in the definition of the performances produced during workshop K and workshop T. As such, the definition already acknowledges the presence of other than human forces in the performance. The aim is thus not to focus on what games do to the concept of performance, but rather what the inclusion of performance does to the act of gameplay. When discussing video games, performance also has connotations of efficiency and technological capacity. Examples from the workshops show how the failure of technology or flawless technological performance capacity affected the performances. Failure in technological performance made room for different, improvised performance by the human performers as well as for the emerging non-human agencies.

Intermedial or live media performance emphasizes action: 'components of the event emerge and re-emerge in a range of "entanglements" that are always producing further "entanglements"'. (Scott 2015) The focus is on the process of production of the performance. The frame of performance and especially intermedial performance does indeed transform gameplay into something new. All the components are there already, but for example, the potentials of agency are activated by framing certain actions in different ways. For example, during gameplay, a stuck character could be seen as a nuisance, as something unwanted, but during a performance, the same occurrence could be seen as an event belonging to the whole.

WHAT IS GAMEPLAY?

As this article deals with the intertwinings of performance, theatre, and gameplay, it is necessary to establish what is included in the concept of gameplay here. Jesper Juul summarizes gameplay as a term to describe 'not how a game looks, but how it *plays*: how the player interacts with its rules and experiences the totality of challenges and choices that the game offers' (Juul 2014: 216). Gameplay is rooted in the programming and/or rules of digital or analog games, yet it can only be understood in relation to the player who experiences it through audiovisual, fictional, and other elements (Juul 2014: 216).

In this article, gameplay then means actions that are conducted while engaged with a video game. Not all the performances discussed are gameplay in the strict sense, but all are derived from gameplay. Juul emphasizes the unique nature of games in relation to other art forms, such as cinema or literature: they are 'unique in explicitly evaluating the performance of the audience, and in controlling the audience access to further content based on that evaluation' (Juul 2014: 216). While the difference between cinema and games is significant, performance and games – or gameplay – share more in common, at least if we consider the player not as a member of the audience, but rather as a performer. Both come to existence through actions.

Gameplay happens with and in relation to games, yet there is no one definition of 'game' that would cover everything that is generally accepted and rejected as games (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera 2012: 5).[4] As this article does not strive to be rigid on what exactly counts as a game, it is enough to state, that a game is 'whatever is labelled a game in common parlance' (ibid.: 6). It is a vague definition, but it reflects the way games were chosen during workshop K and workshop T. The students were instructed to use a game, later a video game, and what they chose reflects their definitions and ideas of games.

GAMES AND PERFORMANCES

Performance and gameplay are both rooted in play[5] and are in many ways mixed. Many differences are on the hierarchical and institutional level and have little to do with actions themselves. If we look at an individual gameplay experience and compare it to an individual experience of a performer, descriptions tend to be quite far from each other. The situations described are intendedly simplified, rather stereotypic. The aim is to draw the end of imaginary dualism comprised of "gameplay" and "performance". On this scale, the stereotype of gameplay is on the other end and the stereotype of performance on the other. Gameplay, especially with video games, tends to be seen as solitary: it can be shared with friends, but it is also designed to be done alone (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera 2012: 22–29). Theatre or any kind of performance can be seen to be the opposite. For performance to be performance both the performer and the spectator are needed. Traditionally this is understood as the presence of at least two humans, and generally, the audience is significantly larger than the group of performers. Games often have some kind of result the player(s) is trying to achieve. This goal is often very concrete, achieved by completing certain actions in a certain order. There are, of course, numerous exceptions to this norm, as video games come in various forms. Performance, however, does not carry the same reputation of being goal-oriented, even though arguably people making performances do generally have goals: to perform, to express, to make money, to be seen.

Like performance, gameplay is seen here as an action that cannot be repeated as exactly the same. Games can be played again, and sometimes the player must repeat certain sequences to the brink of boredom, but the event is never exactly the same as it was before. Something always changes: in the player or in the game. Gameplay is never determined beforehand. The part of the player might be mapped out, but anything can happen: the player might sneeze, faint, get bored, play badly on purpose, or forget what to do – there are countless possibilities for distractions. The same goes for the nonhumans in the mix: the console might explode, the game freeze or get glitchy, or the power might go out. All these examples show how gameplay is live and tied to the moment. This liveness connects with the genre of live media performance: we could argue that all gameplay is emergent action happening within the programmed frame of the game in the interaction between the non-human game elements and the human(s) playing it. Some ways of playing video games and watching gameplay already extend to the realm of performance: for example, E-sports has established its place as a sport, which is watched by millions of people both online and on-location during game tournaments.[6]

Discussion of the necessity of liveness (Auslander 1999) as essential to performance has been present ever since virtual forms of performance gained space. Many performances use video, either live or pre-recorded. If we look at video games, they answer many of the demands of liveness. The environment reacts to the player in many ways, and the composition and rhythm of gameplay are not easily repeatable. Each time a player plays any video game is unique. In other words, the interaction of the player and the game is live.

PERFORMING GAMEPLAY WORKSHOPS

Workshop K was part of a spring school course for media studies at the University of Konstanz in spring 2017. This one-week-long course was divided between three teachers so that I had around eight hours for teaching. During these eight hours, we had time for an introductory

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4   Jaakko Stenros has collected various definitions of games in his PhD thesis (2015).

5   See for example Carlson 1996; Schechner 1988; and Stenros 2015.

6   See for example Hamari & Sjöblom 2017; Rogers 2019.

theory session, and two performance sessions. The theory session included different definitions of performance as a concept, followed by examples of different types of performance, ranging from traditional theatre to motion capture and performances set in game environments. After each example, we discussed what was noteworthy in that specific performance, and especially what or who was performing in each one. The aim was to widen the conceptions of performance and performer to include digital and virtual actions, spaces, and entities.

Workshop T was its own course, part of the curriculum of Internet and Game studies at Tampere University. This course took place in spring 2019 and was comprised of five four-hour sessions. The first session was an introductory one. During the introduction, I showed the students parts of three different adaptations of Shakespeare´s Hamlet: traditional theater, dance theater, and *Minecraft*/machinima version. The aim was to show a sort of fictional evolution of performing arts: from stage to the screen, and as in workshop K, to see virtual spaces and entities as potential parts of a performance. During the following four sessions, each group created a performance each.

When I was asked to teach in Konstanz, I was in the process of gathering material for my PhD thesis by experimenting with solitary performative actions in *Minecraft*. My experiences lead me to think that there would possibly be interesting outcomes if this mindset of gameplay as performance would be introduced to a slightly bigger group of gamers. The aim was to find whether the changes I had observed while playing alone would be applicable in a group context.

When designing workshop K, I had a vision of disturbance: how to somehow disturb the unwritten norms of gameplay situations by framing them with the concept of performance. During workshop K, the directions were quite vague when it came to the assignments. For the first session, I merely advised the students to 'create a performance' using a video game. I did not want to give detailed instructions, as I wanted to allow the students to define performance themselves, without pushing my own impressions more than was presented during the introduction. For the second session, I asked them to 'create a performance' and to 'think outside the box'. The first performances were all focused on what happened on the screen, and some were following the narratives already present in the games. Asking the students to 'think outside box' seemed to guide them to extend the intended performance beyond the console in most cases.

After workshop K, I felt there was something interesting in the performances the students had created. Mixing two concepts, video games and performance, seemed to be, for many, weird and somewhat strange. The question of why this would be worth doing again was the first I had to answer. Indeed, why to do performances using video games in this particular setting? Based on the experiences in workshop K, it was clear to me that there was something in the concept of performance that pushed people to think differently. The materiality of the game became more concrete through a shift in perspective. Students had to consider things they would have not normally noticed – and the same applied to the audience as well. The frame of performance elevated the activity to something similar, yet profoundly different. Compared to my solo experiments the performances made during workshop K were a lot livelier. By this, I mean that the students clearly addressed others in the group with their performances. In other words, understandability and the entertainment value of the performances were considered.

When designing workshop T, I already had an idea of what might happen. In workshop K, I had observed that certain aspects, such as the non-human performers and the creative use of avatars as performing objects were present in many of the performances. In addition to this, I had noticed that the social aspect of the performance situation was important for the performers. Based on these notions the assignments for workshop T were more specific: each had a specific theme that resonated with my previous observations. This did not however mean that the performances created would have been predictable or that the guidelines determined what was going to be created. The aim was to guide students towards different ways to interact with games without restricting their creativity too much.

The themes for the performances in workshop T were re-imagination or adaptation of a classic; non-anthropomorphic non-human performers; pixels as the target audience; and breaking the rules. Each of these themes was designed to address a specific problem or notion. *An adaptation of a classic* was meant to ease the pressure of coming up with an initial idea. When the students had a plot in mind, the first performance was easier to produce. In the second

performance, the aim was to *acknowledge the nonhuman performers* and to move the gaze away from game characters to other entities present during the gameplay moment. The third performance aimed to take the nonhuman theme further by focusing on *pixels as the audience*. By directing the actions towards the gaze of pixels, the performance altered the position of the human audience as well as the way the human performers positioned themselves. The last assignment asked to *break rules, both written and unwritten, theatre and video games, physical and virtual*. This task was designed to twist expectations of how a performance should be constructed, and what would be normally included in gameplay or a performance that deals with gameplay. This last task was also designed to provoke counterplay through performance.

Overall, workshop T had similar results as workshop K in terms of how the performances addressed nonhuman agency, audience, and games in general. The main difference was that during workshop T the students had more time to work on their concepts, performances, and thinking. The overall timespan for workshop K was three days, while for workshop T it was six weeks. During workshop K the students did not need to report their experiences in writing, while in workshop T a learning diary or an essay was part of the course.

Next, I will go through some prominent themes that arose in the workshops. Each will be accompanied by examples, which illuminate the issue in question. All the selected themes were, however, present in most of the 31 performances.

TRANSFORMING GAMEPLAY INTO PERFORMANCE

As mentioned earlier, this article is built on the idea that performance works as a transformative force in relation to gameplay. There are several reasons for this. Performance as a frame messes with the usual norms and rules of the gameplay situation. While performance does not interfere with the actual agreed or coded rules of the game, it replaces the rules of the social situation. Watching gameplay is different from watching something framed as performance, as the frame of performance or theatre has different connotations, starting from the divide to popular and high culture, commercial product, and art experience. These divides are in many ways artificial but say a lot about the stereotypical ways of classifying things. The question here is how does gameplay become performance in this specific context? First, I will look at the actual practices that transform the action from gameplay to performance. Second, I will analyze the changes on a deeper level: what happens to the game, as it is temporarily stripped of its original purpose.

As the focus of both workshops K and T was to make performances with video games, it is essential first to distinguish them as activities. I have already conceptualized performance and defined gameplay, and the next step is to point out the obvious similarities and differences. First, both are activities done – at least for the most part – for leisure and pleasure. Both include consuming, either of the commercial or free products or free or commercial experiences.

Performance is separated from the everyday, from the non-performance by conscious choices, by framing the situation as performance. This happens through the actions of both the performers and the spectators. They engage together in the normative ritual of theatrical performance: the position of the audience, silence, direction of gaze, and applause in the end. To create a performance an intention is needed, initially either from the side of the performer or from the side of the audience. The gaze must be directed to the performance, either by signals given by the performer or by the interest of the audience. This definition includes also spectating gameplay as gameplay. The concept of performance means similarly the display of skills, keeping up standards, and patterned or restored behavior (Carlson 1996). As all of these are present in gameplay as well, distinguishing 'regular' gameplay from gameplay as performance is rather subtle. The students in both workshops read performance in relation to theatre, and this undernote affected the productions. To become performers in this context, the students had to follow assignment guidelines. The motivation thus came from outside, but the students needed to transform it into action.

The transformation from gameplay to performance happened through various methods. In both workshops K and T, during the first performances, various groups used spoken guidance as the transition from game to performance. The performers would first explain the narrative of the performance and then play the game. This narrative was often directly the account of the game

events. In some cases, the performers started playing, and then explained the narrative as they were playing. In some, this happened through a distanced narrator; in others, the performers had scripted descriptive lines for the characters. There was thus a distinctive tendency to make sure that the audience understood exactly what the performers were aiming for.

When preparing the performances, the performers built upon pre-existing schemes of what a performance should entail. These preconceptions were probably partly based on the examples I had given, but mostly on their own experiences and ideas of performances as a phenomenon. These ideas and notions changed during the sessions. In many groups, this meant that the importance of, for example, spoken narratives diminished. In later performances, the need for explanations grew smaller, and most of the performances were framed by connotations of how performance should start and end: waiting for the audience to calm down; the performers entering the stage as a signal of the starting performance; ending in silence; and/or bowing or saying thank you to mark the end. Even when ignoring the content, the events were recognizable as performances of some sort. Structure brings safety, it gives an inkling of what should be expected.

Most of the performances had an added element to the gameplay. By this, I mean that watching gameplay was rarely the only way to experience the performance. Human actions, music, and other elements from outside the game were added to elevate gameplay to performance. This already reduces the importance of the video game as a game and transforms it to something else, a prop, a performer, a stage set. In some performances, the chosen video games were played as intended, but several of the performances did not focus on the core structures, such as the stories or mechanics of the game.

HUMANS AND NON-HUMANS: DEFINING AGENCY BOTH ON AND OFF STAGE

When performing with and for video games, or any kind of machinic device, the question of the non-human arises. We can argue that the video game is a performer as well. The way of looking at the nonhuman performership depends on the role of the nonhuman in the performance. The frame of anthropomorphism is always present when discussing non-human agency. When we open the discussion about whether nonhumans can perform, we define performance solely through human experience. This is of course expected and, in some ways, unavoidable, as our experiences are limited to our human bodies. However, we can make openings and allow for alternative perspectives that consider the possibility of different experiences.

Regardless of the level of agency we give the nonhumans, in these performances their presence is undeniable. Video games simply do not exist without nonhuman input. As this nonhuman influence is usually interactive, we tend to take its influence, if not agency, into account. Labeling video game performance as live media performance allows us to better take the nonhuman agencies into consideration. Jo Scott, drawing from Karen Barad, sees agency in live media performance as emergent, not pre-existing. In other words, agency is created in the intra-actions that take place in the specific performance. Scott writes: 'each moment of improvised generation involves a specific "being" and "doing" in order to build the audio-visual or intermedial space and that moment is also a point of agential enactment.' (Scott 2015).

Jo Scott also calls the intermedial performer a creative technician, which also underlines the nature of the performance. Even though the performances made in the workshops differ from Scott's events, the basics of working between two worlds, the actual and virtual, apply. (Scott 2015) The sense of danger from technology is also something that defines these performances.

Scott writes that the body of the performer in live media performances is in a state of 'dynamic reconfiguring', being both a 'performing technician' and 'activating performer'. (Scott 2015) The relation to virtual and/or machine performers is different from the relationship to other human performers. In the workshops of Konstanz and Tampere, non-humans had multiple positions. In some performances, the nonhumans were used as props, and the focus was directed to the human performers. When the nonhuman, even when moved or operated by humans, is in the center of the stage, it is much easier to identify the performance. If the nonhuman in question is, for example, the game device, it is often left out of the reach of the spotlight. It is often perceived as something that enables the performance – for example, lights make performers visible and microphones make them heard – rather than as something that performs.

All performances using technology have a risk of technological failures or errors, most common problems have to do with lights or sounds. In intermedial or live media performances, failing technology has a more devastating effect, as it is often the center of the performance. Failure of technology is part of the genre, but if not anticipated by the performers and/or the audience, it can cause awkward moments.

I have previously argued that errors, glitches, and bugs in video games – and other virtual environments – are demonstrations of nonhuman agency (Huuhka 2018). Small moments of the game being broken, out of control, small moments of nonhuman control. The same can be applied in performances that feature machinic nonhumans, on stage or backstage. Glitches, bugs, and refusal of cooperation divert the gaze to the nonhuman, making it visible. I would argue that the frame of performance transforms also the nature of the glitch. If during gameplay it would be seen as a distraction, as something that breaks the illusion of smoothness, during a performance a glitch can, at least for the spectator, be an interesting part of the performance. It is the element of surprise, the unexpected. We often talk about machines as repetitive and unerring, but for example, in the performances made during the course machines and virtual entities were the ones to err and fail. In other words, the human was the stable force driving the performance. This, of course, applies to only certain types of performances. If the part of the machine or pixel would be preprogrammed and then merely played on screen, there would not be a possibility for the types of errors described here. However, this would not be live and, as such, it would be seen more as a set or prop than as a nonhuman performer. Liveness is at the core of this notion. The events that happen on the stage happen in cooperation with humans and nonhumans, and due to this, the possibility of things going wrong is essential.

In the workshops bugs, glitches and failures did happen. They forced both the audience and the performers to think differently. For example, I took the failures as performative actions by the non-humans, in other words, they became parts of the performance. The human performers were of course somewhat discouraged by these disturbances, as there was the pressure of the performance going as planned. As none of the participants were experienced performers, let alone live media performers, the pre-assumptions of how performances should be were quite rigid. In addition, the pressure of succeeding in making a good performance was also present.

Example – Broken Controller

During the second performance session of workshop K, one of the groups produced a performance, in which a PS4 controller was in charge and the human performers were spectators inside the performance. The game was *Broforce*. One of the human performers tied the controller stick into one position. This made the game character move only forward, and all other possible movements were thus removed. The set of this performance was a movie theatre, in which the human performers watched the gameplay itself. We, the audience, watched both the screen and the audience inside the performance.

In *Broforce*, the player(s) travel from left to right in a two-dimensional world fighting enemies that emerge from the right side of the screen. In this particular performance, the character was not able to fight, so at the beginning of the performance, the character was killed repeatedly in a few seconds. During the performance, the character however got stuck, and for the last five minutes of the performance, we watched the audience on stage watching a game character running towards a wall. This was not intended, and the performers were unsure how to end the performance, as they had not considered this possibility. The performance ended when I, worried about the time constraints of the workshop, asked whether this was the end. The performers replied with a yes, the audience then applauded, and the performance space was dissolved.

This performance demonstrated two different ways to deal with non-human agency. The performers had given the lead to the controller, even if the conditions were dictated by humans. They positioned themselves as spectators to the gameplay. The agency of the controller was tied to its materiality. By manipulating the controller with a rubber band, it was given a possibility to perform on its own. However, this agency was abducted by the game itself. It improvised, and changed the intended narrative of the performance, which confused the human performers.

Example – Sharing Identities with Avatars

In the second performance session of workshop K, one group used an MMORPG *Path of Exile* to create a performance called *Life*. During the previous session, the same group had used the same game to tell a narrated story of explorers on the quest to find a treasure while fighting monsters – something that resonated with the given narrative of the game. For the second performance, they created something completely different. The students set up a table in the middle of the classroom. They then positioned five avatars, equipped with armor and weapons, on a virtual beach in *Path of Exile*. They stood on the waterline, as waves hit their feet. The human performers then played a chill-out, a beach-vibe song from someone's smartphone. Five performers sat down around the table; some were leaning back in a relaxed manner. Some were wearing sunglasses. One of the performers offered beers for the others. They then opened them, cheered, and continued to drink them, while the music was playing.

The performers were in two bodies at the same time – the virtual and physical human bodies demonstrated a different aspect of the same situation. This was a good example of the performance happening in two dimensions, or two locations at the same time. What made this performance especially interesting was how it transformed not only the gameplay but also the whole environment. Adding a forbidden element, such as alcohol, to the classroom was an act of resistance. It did not merely disturb the norms of gameplay, but also the norms of what is allowed in the academic context.

PERFORMING FOR PIXELS

In workshop T, the fourth assignment was to produce a performance for pixels. I wanted to shift the attention from recognizably shaped game objects, such as characters, to more abstract entities. In previous assignments, pixels had been established as performers, but now the task was to imagine the kind of performance a cluster of pixels would enjoy. As the audience was virtual, I asked the students to take the materiality of the game/console as a part of the performance, as well as to introduce an element from the environment to the performance.

My general observation is that these performances broke away from both the norms of gameplay and 'traditional' theater the most. My interpretation is that the focus on the nonhuman as a spectator somehow encouraged the performers to disobey norms, thus allowed for more varied takes on performance and gameplay. As the students in the group were not theatre students, they perhaps had more conventional ideas of how a performance should be, for example, in relation to the audience. As the audience was already unreachable and unconventional, the performance seen by the human audience was altered.

When watching the performances, it became clear that defining what would be interesting for the pixels was a difficult task. Students had different visions on what would be enjoyable, and in most performances, they had given a lot of thought to the mental landscape of pixels. Many of these ideas were derived from the way pixels look. Many of the performances created used physical props. While discussing their performances, the students argued that pixels would enjoy seeing something else than pixels or virtual entities. In other words, the purpose of the performance was to be different from their normal life, to separate the everyday from something special. Another point was that as pixels constantly perform for us, we should in turn perform for them. The pixels came accessible through anthropomorphism, by giving them desires relatable to human ones. In many performances, it was assumed pixels had the same senses as humans.

The human performers also were more in the spotlight in these performances: during the previous exercises, the humans had been in a way beside the performance. They had a quality of invisible puppeteers in them: the humans were present, but existing towards the game and the screen. This time the relationship was directed more to us humans, and I think this happened because of the imagined pixel audience. The performers had to take that audience into account, and as a byproduct, this acknowledgement spread to include the human audience.

Example – Secluded Entertainment

In one of the performances, the performers built a wall between the human audience and themselves, creating a sort of separate space in which the performance happened. This wall consisted of colorful stool blocks. Above the stools was netting made from plastic yarn. On the other side of the wall were two screens positioned across from each other. The pixel audience

was located on one screen, and on another screen, one of the human players played an 8-bit game, which was left unrecognized – after all, it was meant to be seen and experienced only by the pixel audience. Music from another 8-bit game was played. In this performance, the idea was that pixels enjoy watching themselves, or others that resemble them, in a secluded environment. We were told after the performance that the other screen facing away from the human audience was the pixel audience and the performance happened on the other screen, and the wall was built to exclude us, the human audience from that event. This worked, as the human audience was not able to see much from behind the wall. I saw a glimpse of the game screen; the pixel audience was hidden from view.

This performance worked against conventions of performing and spectating, as it shut out us, human spectators completely. This positioning answered the assignment, however broke against the unwritten rules of that specific classroom/performance situation: the spectators should see what the performers were doing. The pixel audience was given priority, in other words, they were taken seriously.

CONCLUSIONS

All the themes discussed in this essay deal with actions that happen at the border, in liminal space. The border between physical and virtual; man and machine; gameplay and performance. Performance as a tool and concept could transgress these borders, and thus uncover structures and entities otherwise left in the dark. These transformative moments do not alter the virtual or physical reality of a certain game; however, they do open moments of doing otherwise. They offer a space for the non-humans to gain agency, and for the humans to experience virtual worlds as something different. The frame of performance offers a new viewpoint into the material realities of video games, allowing us to take games and their components seriously as agents.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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PUBLICATION
IV

Anarchic Counterplay – Re-Imagining Gameplay as an Act of Performative Resistance

Marleena Huuhka