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Weird Encounters in Virtual Worlds

Towards a theory of performative, anarchic counterplay as resistance

The public defence of MA Marleena Huuhka's doctoral dissertation in Performance Studies was held at Tampere University on 28 March 2024. Reader, Doctor Liam Jarvis (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London) acted as Opponent and Docent, University Lecturer Riku Roihankorpi as Custos.

Playing is something we all do; it is common to humans and animals. We grow up playing out imaginary scenarios, we practice for a life that might be possible or even for a life that is completely utopic, out of reach. As adults we play in different ways: we play roles, we play games, and we play with our children and our animal companions. We construct and understand our world through play. Play is a part of the ritual of being human. In recent months I have witnessed, mediated through my phone, how even in the darkest times and in the middle of apocalyptic circumstances children find solace in play. Play has the ability to lift us beyond our sometimes gruesome surroundings, and this ability makes play revolutionary.

I have been playing since childhood: first with toys, then on a theater stage, and later video games with computers and consoles. My love for playing has led me to this current career path: first to study theater research and later to dip my toes into game studies as well. Theater and video games are forms of art that I have both loved and hated, but always found intriguing in the depth they offer. They share something that allows us as humans to reflect on our existence in a way that differs from other forms of art. I argue that this is due to their processual and practical nature, as well as their temporality.

Performing arts and video games have a common origin – both as forms of human activity and as fields of research – and in the contemporary mediatized world they have become increasingly entwined. However, in academic discourse, they have remained somewhat apart. My thesis is one account of discussing these phenomena together. I have published my research findings in four articles, and these articles demonstrate the journey this process has been. It has not been a straightforward one: I did not have a clear hypothesis in the beginning, but rather themes and instances that have emerged along the way have influenced the narrative my research tells. The aim of this lectio is to show glimpses of this journey.

Key concepts

First, I would like to clarify some central terms. Performance, play, game, and gameplay are discussed throughout my thesis, and they all are debated concepts with multiple definitions. I will offer some insight into how they have been understood and used in this thesis. In this research, the term performance refers to artistic performance productions created in certain, in this case, gameplay circumstances. It also refers to a phenomenon that has the ability to somehow make a change in the world around us, it is, as Erika Fischer-Lichte describes, transformative.[1]

Play refers to free and unproductive activity that enables us to experience the world around us. Play is about creating new worlds,[2] play moves between order and chaos, between building and destroying,[3] play is rebellious and revolutionary. The concept of game has been an object of debate in game studies since the emergence of the field in the 1990s. I have purposefully distanced myself from this debate and have adopted a somewhat all-encompassing view that "a game is whatever is labeled a game in common parlance".[4] Gameplay then refers to concrete actions that the player makes while playing the game, and it covers both virtual and physical processes.

Indeed, one aim of this research has been to establish new ways of talking about video games as performances, or video games as a performative medium, or even performances that utilize video game logic. As such my research is pathbreaking work that offers a new contact surface between performance studies and game studies.

Research journey

The journey that led to this moment started when I got an Xbox console to my office at the university. At that time, I was piecing together a plan for a PhD thesis that focused on animal representations in certain video games. That approach had started to feel too superficial: video games as a unique medium called for a different approach. While waiting for inspiration I started to play *Minecraft*.[5] *Minecraft* was then and still is an extremely popular open-world building game in which the player explores, mines, cuts, farms, and builds. Possibilities are endless in this block-shaped world.

While playing, I became interested in finding out how a player could resist the urge to immerse in video games. When I play video games, the experience is – at its best or worst – both physical and almost spiritual. For a brief moment, I become a part of that specific world: I feel for its inhabitants and my body trembles from stress while trying to achieve something challenging. Immersion, or as it is sometimes called incorporation,[6] is a powerful state. As a scholar interested in doing things differently, immersion started

1 Fischer-Lichte 2008.
2 Giddins 2005.
3 Sicart 2014.
4 Elias et al. 2012.
5 Mojang Studios 2009.
6 Calleja 2011.

to bother me immensely. Immersing oneself completely into a game felt too easy, too nice. While immersing oneself in a narrative, one is also unavoidably immersed in the narratives beyond the surface of the game. Those narratives often entail colonialism, destruction, violence, and control.

Minecraft, besides being a pleasant environment with plenty of adventures to pursue, invites the player not only to joyful exploration and experimentative building but also to the colonial urge to settle all land. It deals with the trope of a European explorer setting foot where "none" have been before. Destroying indigenous villages is a popular pastime of many *Minecraft* players. Most game researchers state that game violence does not promote real violence, and while I do completely agree, I believe video games, as any form of art, both enforce and dismantle norms and hierarchical structures present in our society.

I started to search for ways of playing *Minecraft* that could challenge its colonial atmosphere. Interestingly, one of the strategies that felt most powerful was choosing to do absolutely nothing. I stood in my virtual place for hours, watching the sun set and rise again, listening to the sounds of the virtual world dropping cues of hidden adventures awaiting nearby. In *Minecraft* the pull of the adventure is undeniable and resisting the urge to play by denying or inhibiting any action whatsoever was my first experimentation with performative counterplay. My experimentations in *Minecraft* did not only stress the importance of resistance in play, but they also made me aware of the nonhuman rhizome connected to me during gameplay. Refusing to act gave space to all the other entities to become noticeable – algorithms, pixels, my Xbox, non-player characters – all of them continued to act even when I did not. Those experiences in *Minecraft* were the main foci of my first article.[7]

Writing about video games and performances together made me realize that the terminology was lacking. Thus, my second article drew together previous research on common aspects of video games and theatre or performance.[8] In addition, I introduced five categories of video games as performance or part of performance. These categories were:

1) Video games as an aesthetic resource. This category refers to the use of video game images or audio in staged performances to convey mood, time period, violence, or similar aspects.

2) Video games as a structural category. This category includes for example many immersive theatre performances, all performances that borrow their form or part of their structure from games.

3) Performances staged inside video games. This refers to large performances, such as live concerts, that game companies or individual players organize in virtual game environments.

4) Performances made with video games. This category refers to performances where a video game itself is either a major medium or a performer. Here the game is no longer a prop or an 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

7 Huuhka 2019.

8 Huuhka 2020.

somewhere between the virtual and the physical.

Finally, the most important and also the most elusive of the categories is 5) Gameplay as performance. It shifts the attention to gameplay as an artistic process. This category offers possibilities for looking at video games as performances, and further, thinking about performance in new ways. Gameplay as performance requires the abandonment of representational thinking: virtual things should be taken as what they are, virtual entities and assemblages – clusters of pixels, code, and machinery – and not as representations of things existing in our tangible world. By moving beyond the representational level towards the material and virtual levels allows us to access the embodied experiences of gameplay. The actions of the player are not representational after they have been conveyed through the game device into the game world. They are actual physical things happening in the virtual world. They are mediated through, not represented through the game controller.

To be able to access potentialities of resistance residing in performative gameplay and gameplay as performance I had the opportunity to organize two workshops for university students, one in Konstanz, Germany 2017 and one in Tampere 2019. In these workshops, students made performances with and in video games, and sometimes even for video games. The first workshop was more experimental in the sense that I had no expectations of what would or could happen, what kind of performances the students would make. There were several performances made in those couple of days in Konstanz that assured me that performance as a frame once added to gameplay was able to create new ways of interacting with games and create new ways of understanding counterplay and its potentialities.

In the second workshop in Tampere I was already expecting certain types of performances, and those expectations were mirrored in the instructions I gave to the students. The focus was on thinking beyond the human experience and questioning all rules of both gameplay and performance. Both of the workshops produced interesting and not-so-interesting performances which of course was to be expected. Most of them were in the category of performances made with video games. All of them did question the concepts of gameplay and performance by creating new ways of interaction.

This far in the process, I had defined the common ground between video games and performances,[9] analyzed my adventures in *Minecraft*[10] and the performances made in the workshops.[11]

Anarchic counterplay

The next step was to think a bit further: how could we challenge the hierarchical structures of the video game industry even more? How could theatre or performance be a theoretical tool in this resistance? I started to formulate the concept of anarchic counterplay.[12] Anarchic for me in this research refers to an attitude. It describes the

9 Huuhka 2020.
10 Huuhka 2019.
11 Huuhka 2021.
12 Huuhka 2024.

relationship between performative counterplay and the game that is being played. It stands for all little rebellious acts against the hierarchies of the game in question: it can be against hypercapitalism, immersion, or representational thinking.

One of the key things in defining this anarchic attitude has been my adaptation of Antonin Artaud's attitude towards the contemporary theatre of his time. According to Artaud, all masterpieces should be destroyed,[13] and in my research masterpieces – both the canonized ideas of Artaud as well as hierarchical structures of video games – have been, at least metaphorically, destroyed.

Performative, anarchic counterplay is about experiencing and inflicting changes to game dynamics. It comprises of performative practices that aim to reimagine, rearrange, and deconstruct game spaces, game practices, and game environments. Performative, anarchic counterplay has the potential to disturb established structures, and it does so in the context of theatrical performance as well. It challenges the notion of performance as a phenomenon related only to human presence.

My research brings forth new ways of understanding both performance and video games. It opens up new portals of performative resistance in video game worlds, allowing for new takes on hierarchical structures embedded in those games. Video games as performance reveals new possible practices for both gameplay and performance, out of which a new hybrid reality artform could be created. I believe anarchic counterplay to be a possible tool in defining this new realm.

Anarchic, performative counterplay can be used to build utopistic performance and game spaces. The refusal of the obvious creates space for something new to arise: there are a multitude of ways of existing in this world with others. New connections with both human and non-human peers might lead us to new ways of dealing with this burning world of ours.

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13 Artaud 1966.

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