Videogames, analytics and the 'becoming-gramme' of play

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INTRODUCTION
Technologies that capture and generate data occupy an important role in shaping the practices of everyday life. As a range of scholars writing on 'mundane data' (Pink et al., 2018; Smith, 2018) suggest, the capture and transmission of data works to track, govern, and produce space and time in our everyday lives. Globally, videogame play is a significant part of our everyday mediated lives – and is, increasingly, forming a strong rapport with technologies and techniques that inscribe and relay (gaming) performances, practices, and processes through data.

This paper presents some meditations on videogame data analytics – which harvest and aggregate gameplay, presenting the spatiotemporal flux of ingame events in the form of numeric data or visualisations; materialising the embodiments, affects and technical processes involved in play. As recent work suggests, data analytics platforms are increasingly emerging in both proprietary (Ash, 2015) and third-party (Egliston, 2016, 2017) capacities – largely within the context of multiplayer videogames.

In this paper I attempt to unpack what data analytics might mean within the contexts of 'everyday' play. I do so from a 'post-phenomenological' perspective – drawing selectively on the work of prolific media and technology theorist Bernard Stiegler. I mobilise Stiegler's concept of 'grammatisation' to frame my discussion of analytics (2010). Grammatisation – an aspect of Stiegler's wider account of human-technical being – refers to the breakdown of wider performances or phenomena into some other discrete form (or gramme), as to make them retrievable and reproducible. Just as alphabetisation is a grammatisation of the flows and embodiments of speech, analytics platforms break the spatiotemporal flows of gameplay into numbers and graphics. Crucially, grammatisation for Stiegler, is tied closely to habit – understood here as ways of doing and being as transformed by environmental phenomena (see also Grosz, 2013).

Just as the development of writing (as grammatisaiton of speech) feeds back into our ways of speaking, I argue that grammatising gameplay through analytics folds into our own gaming practices, ordering the ways in which the game is understood and negotiated. Based on an autoethnographic element of a wider research project (and using a 'walkthrough' method, after Light et al., 2016), this paper discusses two main case studies of popular analytics platforms in the game Dota 2: Dotabuff and OpenDota.

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In examining these platforms, I explore two main threads. First, I look at how gaming analytics work to generate self-knowledge through exteriorising our own past performance. I suggest that this grammatisation allows players to reflect on well-played performance, and revise error – intervening in the condition of videogame technicity and allowing for the establishment of productive habits. Second, I explore how analytics grammatises the play of others. Dota 2 has a playerbase of millions, and analytics platforms provide a view – through the data – of how a significant portion of players approach the game. Emphasis is given to how expert play is made visible via analytics platforms. In this way, I argue that analytics operates as an aspirational framework. Keeping with Stiegler's explicitly activist and critical philosophical project, I also discuss some of the detrimental effects of pervasive stat tracking and sharing on the experience of play.

Taken together, analytics work as what Stiegler terms 'mnemotechnics' – technologies which (via grammatising play) orient how humans experience things (like videogames) as a confluence of perceptions, anticipations and recollections. In short, I argue that gaming's 'data-fication' has become an integral part of how we experience videogames – which can productively be theorized, after Stiegler, as a becoming-gramme of play.

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