

Deepening Gameplay Experiences through Estrangement

Jaakko Stenros

University of Tampere
Pinni B, Kanslerinrinne 1
33014 Tampere, Finland
jaakko.stenros@uta.fi

Tanja Sihvonen

University of Vaasa
Wolffintie 34
65200 Vaasa, Finland
tanja.sihvonen@uva.fi

ABSTRACT

Gameplay is customarily conceived of, in its ideal form, as uninterrupted. Flow, immersion, engagement, even addiction, all imply a continuous engaging with the game. Yet play can also be reflective and it is prone to interruptions. In this article we approach gameplay from an oppositional point of view, by looking at it as estrangement, distance, reflection, and queering. The article will address the poetics of estrangement both in theory and in practice.

Keywords

Estrangement, queering, seamful design, reflection, gameplay

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the history of game studies, gameplay practices have customarily been approached via concepts such as flow, immersion, engagement, and even addiction. A similar setting has also been true to much of game design, where the paramount principle has been based on providing the players with as immersive, engaging, and affective experiences as possible (Pinchbeck 2006, 400). Complete absorption of players in the game is idealized. The goal of game design is often to facilitate the realization of players' escapist fantasies while cutting off from the ordinary, quotidian world and engrossing them in the game space. Games that are able to produce such experiences are celebrated, and these captivating potentials are often discussed in game journalism, for instance, as the basis for positive reviews. Likewise, the biggest societal fears associated with games also build on the idea of games being absorbing, indeed, sometimes even too absorbing, and thus leading to problematic play and even game "addiction".

This conceptual landscape is founded on an understanding of player behaviour as something distinctive to player-game interaction, and in particular, on the idea of the player seeking to distance or isolate herself from the surrounding world through immersion. Both the positive and the negative version of this ideal seem like the literal interpretation of Johan Huizinga's (1938) *magic circle* (cf. see Stenros 2014). Nor does it seem like we are done with this trend: We can always try to find ways for games to become even more captivating and ubiquitous, as the recent interest in virtual and augmented reality, transmedia, wearable computing, and seamless interfaces demonstrates.

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Emerging from the practical experiences of play, however, is another kind of understanding of the act of gameplay. In the upcoming paper, we have two objectives. First, we seek to find ways to tackle the common experience of *estrangement*, or making the familiar unfamiliar, through explorations in game studies, literature, and performance theory (cf. Brecht 1964; Freud 1919; Shklovsky 1929; de Wildt 2014; Dunne 2014; Pötzsch 2017). Our aim here is to understand how and to what effect the mechanics and systems of the game being played call attention to themselves, thus breaking the illusion of a coherent gameworld that the player is immersed in. Second, we are interested in estrangement as a deliberate design philosophy and want to trace how it is employed in games. We are interested in events, characters, items, and game mechanics that break the player's suspension of belief, force her to take a step back in perplexion, and look at the game with the eyes of an outsider. We propose that the experiences exposing the artificial or mechanical components of play experience need not be understood in wholly negative terms. Indeed, we are interested in the dual consciousness of playing and not-playing as well as the *in situ* reflection that these occurrences propel.

What we aim to do in our paper in practical terms is to conduct an analysis of the player-character relation as the fundamental function of the semiosis in games, and conduct an analysis of the conditions driving the player towards identification with the game character(s) on one hand, and maintaining a critical distance, on the other. By looking into the player-game relationship in a new way, and trying out methods developed for dramatic action, we aim to answer the following question: How do games create possibilities for transgressive and subversive play through estrangement? In particular, we are interested in understanding, how the dynamic and ambiguous activities that are often grouped under the elusive concept of "gameplay" can be approached through analysing the player's position vis-à-vis the game character, and regarding them as complex and multi-layered. In this paper we will use the term estrangement to refer to *seamful design that creates possibilities for reflection*. In addition, we are interested in a particular subset of estrangement that we call *queering*.

"Queer" and "queering" are complicated and convoluted terms with multiple meanings, and they refuse to settle in any clearly demarcated categories. We use queering as a reference to the practices of using something against the grain, in a subversive or dissident way, which are usually connected to orientations and practices that counter, question or undermine heteronormativity and the dichotomous gender system. The term and its applications have been and still are heavily debated in queer studies (e.g. Barker & Scheele 2016). In theoretical discourse, queer has been conceived of as encompassing a spirit of critique as well as a drive towards difference, self-reflexivity, and change (Giffney & Hird 2008, 33). As such, queering is an active, transgressive practice that questions and even violates norms and cultural conventions. Queer game studies is a relatively new field, but it is growing fast (cf. Ruberg & Shaw 2017). However, queering can also, in a more straightforward manner, refer to the introduction of queer or LGBT content in a cultural product, such as a game in the case of our article.

In all of its meanings, queering is a contextual practice – like indeed most practices associated with transgressions. There is no inherently queer act, just as there is no inherently transgressive act. Both are possible only in relation to the external world and its social norms. Estrangement as a concept is similar in that it is highly contextual. An act that is meant to produce estrangement and alienation can become familiar and formalized and thus lose its "power". This is the challenge with estrangement; alienation cannot be standardized.

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