Pixels, performances, and failures – Defining non-human agency in video game performances

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation is based on two workshops held in the University of Konstanz, Germany, in 2017, and Tampere University, Finland, in 2019. Both workshops were inspired by the author´s ongoing practice-based Ph.D. project in which they explore performance as a method for creating practices of resistance and counterplay (Apperley 2010, Huuhka 2019, Nakamura & Wirman 2005) in and with videogames. During these two workshops, students produced 31 separate intermedial/live media performances using video games and game devices as props, sets, performance spaces, and performers. Performance is here understood as transformative (Fischer-Lichte 2008), and the focus is specifically on intermedial performances (Kattenbelt 2010) and live media performances (Cooke 2010, Scott 2015) that happen in and with video games.

This presentation will focus on the relationship between humans and non-humans in these performances. The non-humans here include for example game consoles, games as physical objects as well as data, pixels, and other physical props used by the students in the performances. During the workshops, the students were instructed to create performances in/with video games within a few relatively loose guidelines, such as "recreate a classic" or "create a performance for pixel audience". They were free to choose the games, but this choice was somewhat limited by the availability of game devices. In the performances video games had several positions or roles: they were utilized as physical material and as inspiration, as references and ideas, as well as given the position as performers alongside human performers. In some performances, games or game consoles had the position of the audience.

Non-human performers can sometimes be dismissed as mere lifeless puppets, but when looking at things such as video games, pixels, or game devices, it is clear that they have more agency than one might think. All technology can fail, and all intermedial/live media performances face the possibility of failures, power outages, glitches, bugs, and various other disruptions. These disruptions can be considered as demonstrations of non-human agency (Bennett 2010). During intermedial/live media performances failures and disruptions add an improvisational element as the non-humans temporarily control the stage.

During the workshops, these failures and disruptions happened frequently, partly because the rehearsal time was relatively short. The unexpected non-human elements

and events added meanings that would have been unreachable through humans solely. I will demonstrate the significance of the non-humans to gameplay performance and gameplay as well through examples from performance workshops.

This presentation deals 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 has the ability to 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 up 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.

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