Games and Gestures - Remarks on Emotes in Digital Online Games

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Keywords

Fortnite, games as a service, emote, unit operation, self-expression, commodification, labour

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The digital media landscape of 2019 showcases the significant transformations that the games industry underwent in the last five years. Among the dominant paradigms for the design and the marketing of new games are both the conception of "Gaming as a service" (Cai et al. 2014) in the sense of a game as a never-ending, continuously expanding online service and the free to play model, which usually aims to monetize games through "micro-transactions". Both of these paradigms work well with one another and they shape some of the most successful games today, like *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) or *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017). I want to address a specific question that is situated at the intersection of these business practices with aesthetic and design conventions, player communities and the cultural contexts in which the games take place. I'm interested in (unlockable) character animations, often called emotes, which are distributed as ingame rewards as well as microtransactions in games like Fortnite. These emotes are a part of online game design since the days of early multiplayer games like MUDs (Dodge, Kitchin 2001, 147), but they are only recently acquiring cultural significance both in the games themselves as well as beyond them. For example, Fortnite's most iconic emotes have found their way into schoolyards, graduation ceremonies (Dedmon 2018) and international soccer matches (Thier 2018).

I propose to regard emotes a part of the ludo mix that demonstrates how digital games emerge as cultural objects that are interdependent with various media ecologies, while at the same time emphasizing a corporate strategy of commodification that positions games as modular artifacts marked by an artificial separation of aesthetical and mechanical layers. To this end, I'll focus on Fortnite's emotes, which can be considered unit operations in Bogost's sense, that is, as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discreet, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (Bogost 2008, 3). And like Bogost's units, emotes work precisely because they are not directly involved in the game's systems, but instead offer contained means of expression. The way emotes interact with other parts of the game could be described as simulations in Frasca's (2003) or Bogost's sense if we consider gestures, dances or other culturally significant elements of human movement as systems. Thus, emotes are a case of unit operations whose meaning-making in digital games unfolds independently of the game's systems through the simulation of game-external means

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

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of expression. These means in the form of gestures or dances are encapsulated and marketed in discrete parts in the game, much like Bogost argues in respect to the object oriented programming paradigm (Bogost 2008, 38 - 41) and game development technologies like engines (56 - 66). In the same way digital games are no longer only modularized and compartmentalized on the level of their development, but also with regards to their marketing and monetization, additions like character skins or emotes are subjected to the same logic, which, in the case of emotes, has raised the question of whether or not specific dance moves can be considered intellectual property (Statt 2018).

If emotes can be considered unit operations, this leads to several conclusions that will be discussed in the second half of the presentation. First of all, emotes are detached from the game's systemic operations, but connected to the game's aesthetics, where they are fulfilling various functions. They are mostly a tool of player self-expression, thus opening up a space of non-instrumental play like the one advocated for by Sicart's idealistic theory of play (Sicart 2012, Sicart 2014). This demonstrates the problematic artificiality of differentiating between systems and aesthetics/graphics when considering games, an argument that has grown especially popular with publishers and developers themselves, who claim that visual modifications are "just cosmetic" and no integral part of the game. Yet it is evident that precisely these "hedonic" (Lehdonvirta 2009) attributes make virtual goods like emotes desirable. Secondly, emotes are also, at least where Fortnite and most other free to play service games are concerned, heavily commodified. The case of emotes can thus be considered a paradigmatic example for the commodification of culture and cognitive work that has been identified as a driving force of the games industry by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, 45). Thirdly, their meaning making also serves as means of communication between players, although most games that incorporate emotes also offer (voice)chat functions (there are notable examples, e.g. Hearthstone (cp. Arjoranta, Siitonen 2018)). This puts emotes in a paradoxical position. They enable player self-expression, but do so through the commodification of human expression (gestures, dances). And they're both a means of (albeit redundant) communication in the game as well as a way to communicate Fortnite itself, as evidenced by the accounts of the game's emotes finding their way into non-Fortnite contexts.

The case of Fortnite shows that the ludo mix not only connects games and various other popular media, but also tends to reduce both to their most iconic elements. This emphasizes the notion of digital games as modular products in which modifications without systemic consequence ("cosmetics" in the language of publishers and developers) can be continuously marketed, thus becoming the most recognizable elements of said games. These economic, cultural and aesthetic developments raise new questions for game studies as a field of research that is increasingly confronted with objects that cannot be regarded as contained works with easily identifiable beginnings, ends, and borders.

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