

Exploring Transformative Aesthetic Experiences in Videogames

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Keywords

player experience, aesthetics, transformative experience, transformation, reflection, empirical aesthetics, autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

Playing videogames can change us as persons. This capacity of videogames to transform our perspectives is at the center of many “serious games” that have an explicit purpose outside the scope of entertainment (Ritterfeld et al. 2009), such as producing specific behavioral changes in players for example in the context of education (Braley et al. 2019; Barab et al. 2012) or well-being and healthcare (Pusateri et al. 2020; Burns et al. 2010). However, such transformative responses play an important role within the recreational context of entertainment and art as well, as they appear to relate to a wide range of personally meaningful, “eudaimonic” aesthetic gratifications that do not fit into the traditional scope of what constitutes positive player experience (PX) (Daneels et al. 2021; Whitby et al. 2019; Bopp et al. 2021).

This ability for videogames to act as agents of change has been associated with their potential as “reflection machines” (Khaled 2018, 6). However, prior approaches to the study and design of reflective and transformative videogame experiences – e.g., Culyba’s (2018) Transformational framework – have too often focused on explicit and pre-defined transformative outcomes that can be clearly measured while ignoring the more aesthetic and individualistic but oftentimes less clearly measurable and more ineffable transformations – and thus a significant part of the transformative potential of videogames remains unacknowledged (Phelps and Rusch 2020).

With my PhD project, I aim to address this gap by investigating the aesthetic aspects of transformative experiences in videogames, delineating how such experiences may evolve throughout and beyond gameplay, and how they can be understood from the experiential perspective of players. The project is situated at the intersection of PX research, game studies, and empirical aesthetics. Videogames are still in the process of maturing as an aesthetic medium capable of conveying a wide spectrum of intricate expressions; currently prevalent PX concepts, such as fun or immersion, uphold a narrow view of positive videogame experiences (Marsh and Costello 2012; Aeschbach et al. 2022; Iacovides and Cox 2015) – and whereas experiences that differ from this conventional, more hedonistic view are being increasingly recognized, they are often clustered under broad and perhaps loaded terms such as “serious experience” (Marsh and Costello 2012; Iacovides and Cox 2015) or “eudaimonic experience” (Daneels et al. 2021; Cole and Gillies 2022). Thus, the field of PX research presently lacks empirical and conceptual tools through which videogames could be understood more comprehensively as complex and nuanced, emotionally diverse aesthetic experiences.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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EMPIRICAL AESTHETICS AND VIDEOGAMES

My PhD project draws inspiration from empirical aesthetics, which is a research area at the intersection of psychology and neuroscience that investigates the ways in which people perceive and experience art and aesthetic objects. The project explores ways in which insights stemming from empirical aesthetics could be adopted into game studies and PX research to build a more extensive understanding of aesthetic player experiences. Empirical aesthetics is typically concerned with non-interactive media – e.g., painting, film, or music – and it is unclear how the interactive qualities of videogames relate to different theories of the field – and thus modifications are likely required before such theories can be applied to videogames.

More specifically, in my project I am concerned with how videogames can harness *transformative* aesthetic experiences – which in empirical aesthetics have been modelled as being triggered by a *discrepancy* between the experiencing individual's perception and self-image that demands a reconstruction of one's schema, changing how one perceives themselves and the initially discrepant artwork so that a more harmonious outcome is attainable (Pelowski and Akiba 2011). This model emphasizes the cognitive and emotional processes of the perceiver, and it provides a lens through which I examine the phenomenon of transformative aesthetic experiences in my project.

RESEARCH GOALS

My research builds on the works of Cole and Gillies (2022; 2021) who pose *emotional challenge* – i.e., challenges of understanding or feeling – as a trigger for emotionally complex, self-reflective, and potentially transformative player experiences – which resembles the concept of discrepancy as described by Pelowski and Akiba (2011). Although there is a growing body of conceptual and empirical work on emotionally challenging (Bopp et al. 2018; Cole and Gillies 2022), meaningful (Rusch 2017), self-reflective (Mekler et al. 2018; Marsh and Costello 2013), or even transformative videogame experiences (Whitby et al. 2019) – little has been said about the aesthetic and emotional qualities of transformative player experiences, or how such experiences are evoked by videogames and how they evolve throughout and beyond gameplay. This is what I set out to explore in my PhD project in an approach that incorporates elements of ethnographic, phenomenological, and grounded theory research, employing qualitative research methods such as autoethnography and interview.

Current and Future Works

I am currently working on getting my first study published, which is an autoethnographic exploration of transformative videogame experiences that provides insights into the temporal trajectory and dynamics of profound and personally transformative videogame experiences, highlighting the pivotal role of post-play re-engagement in the overall arc of such experiences. Furthermore, the findings suggest that current PX vocabulary is insufficient for depicting the kind of metacognitive player engagement that seems to characterize such experiences.

Topics for further studies surrounding transformative player experiences include (1) deconstruction of emotional challenge and discrepancy, (2) the relationship between immersion and reflection, and (3) post-play re-engagement. By participating in the DiGRA 2023 PhD Consortium, I hope to receive feedback and advice regarding my research project and my approach and methods. Also, as a novice researcher who has presently more closely affiliated with games research within human-computer interaction, I look to connect with game studies researchers and to become better acquainted with the field, to gain a more holistic perspective on videogames as an aesthetic medium.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Elisa D. Mekler for offering me valuable feedback on this submission.

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