

Skillful play is dependent on rules. Notes on a Phenomenology of Skills in Games and Digital Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, it has been one of the focal points of game studies to understand games through rules. Caillois's (2001) definition is often cited when it comes to categorizing games between *ludus* and *paidia* with rules being constitutive of the first category. Rules as constitutional entities for videogames have furthermore been explored by a wide range of scholars. (e.g., Bogost, 2007; Juul, 2005; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Sicart, 2023) In my project, I want to shed light on a topic that has much less grasped attention of game scholarship: the interdependence between rules and skillful play. It is my hypothesis that skills provide the necessary epistemic access to a game and its playthings for aesthetic and phenomenological research to happen. The ongoing research project brings together positions of the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology with the more recent analytical philosophy of mind to investigate how rules shape the experience and the form-making of games. Still at its beginnings, the project first studies classical chess but will in the future include sensorimotor skill-based videogames like *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018).

THE RELATION BETWEEN RULES, CONCEPTS, AND SKILLS

To my knowledge, the role of practical skills has not been much investigated in game studies even though games are undoubtedly skill dependent not only in their enaction but also in their epistemic study. The fact that many videogames have a high skill ceiling, especially ones played in competitive scenes, means that ludologists must themselves acquire skills to appropriately study the game. But what does it mean to acquire skills? In analytical philosophy, the question became a battleground for various philosophies of mind. Hubert Dreyfus (2013) can be credited with igniting a debate anthologized in Schear (2013). He contended that rules (which to him are coterminous with reasons, principles, and propositional knowledge) guide perception and skillful activity but ultimately disappear into a 'background' when a player achieves mastery. In a game like chess, novices must first learn not only the game-constitutive rules but *tactical rules* like controlling the center. As novices grow into experts, they must gradually learn to play more flexibly and "switch from detached rule-following to a more involved and situation-specific way of play". (Dreyfus, 2014, 111) Experts who

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have seen and memorized thousands of situations may be able to retroactively rationalize their actions, but, according to Dreyfus (2013), in the moment of ‘skillful coping’, their behavior is non-rational. In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty (2011), Dreyfus (2013: 17) claims that masters are absorbed in a field of play in which they experience the chess board as “pervaded by lines of force ... which call for a certain mode of action”. In other words, the particular chess pieces with their different roles in the offensive and defensive setting afford the player to make certain moves and improve their position. The skillful player would in Dreyfus’s conception be someone who learned to rightfully perceive the piece’s potential including the right actions they require for the best possible outcome. A central point articulated by Dreyfus is also that *game-constitutive rules* just like *tactical rules* pervade the ‘background’ of skillful play, but they are not consciously present in the attentive mental activity of play (the foreground so to say).

GOALS OF THE PROJECT

Dreyfus’s characterization of expert skill as ‘mindless activity’ called forth a surge of opposed positions (see Schear (2013)) which, for example, reconsider the role of planning in relation to skillful actions (Fridland, 2021), question Dreyfus’s notion of rationality (McDowell, 2013), or emphasize the importance of judgment and self-awareness in the performing arts (Gallagher, 2021). Helpful in my project is Alva Noe (2012, 2015) who writes that concepts and sensorimotor skills are two kinds of ‘skills of access’ (2012) that the conscious mind employs to make things present to itself. Skill enriches our perception of objects; it entails that the more skillful we are the more we perceive the intricate potentialities of a chess position. In short: what we assume a chess piece in a particular situation is how it appears to us in the event of play. Plaything phenomenology is thus reliant on our skillful handling of a game. This holds true not only for such cognitive tasks like chess but for sensorimotor skills like in most action games (well exemplified by *Smash Ultimate* where questions of style and performance are coupled with, e.g., a professional’s players individuation).

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