Order in Chaos: Toward a Theory of Videoludic Noise

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THE PARASITE IN THE ROOM

Since its inception in the field of information theory, traced back to the seminal work of Shannon and Weaver (1949), the concept of noise is part of a rich and complex history. Over the years, noise has been a key object of study in many fields within the humanities, such as media studies (Carmi 2020; Nunes 2011; Parikka 2012), film studies (Betancourt 2017; Cubitt 2017; Gawthrop 2006), sound studies (Attali 1977; Cycleback 2016; Graham 2023), semiotics (Eco 1979; Babeux 2007), and philosophy (Malaspina 2018; Serres 1980; Thompson 2017).

In game studies, significant contributions have been made concerning transgressive game content (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020), counterplay activities (Aarseth 2007; Consalvo 2007; Meades 2015; Mortensen *et al.*, 2015), and countergaming artifacts (Flanagan 2009; Galloway 2006; Schrank 2014). However, these works never framed their analysis in terms of noise. Among the few sources that have embraced noise as a concept, three book chapters (Consalvo 2009; Krapp 2011; Salen and Zimmerman 2004), a thesis chapter (Montembeault 2019), and six articles from the issue 18 of the French academic journal "Sciences du jeu"[1] stand as illuminating advancements in this evolving discourse.

For instance, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 197-199) draw inspiration from Shannon and Weaver's model to reevaluate the act of game design. They conceptualized the profession as a delicate balance between the meaningful order of rules and the inherent chaos of game uncertainty—an essential dynamic for players to adopt a lusory attitude necessary for the advent of play. Consalvo (2009) similarly leverages Shannon and Weaver's framework to construct a typology of noise, broken it down into three distinct types: 1) cultural noise (language barriers among different nationalities), 2) semantic noise (misunderstandings related to specialized lingos) and

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3) technical noise (technological issues disrupting signal transmission). The typology illustrates that in online multiplayer games, noise functions not as a game breaker but as an engine of socialization. It leads players to collaborate with each other to negotiate technical bugs and communicational difficulties, thereby consolidating communities.

Clearly, game studies have just begun to tap into the potential of noise while lacking the theoretical depth found in the humanities. This represents an opportunity to confront the parasite in the room, which is the gap between the emerging theory of noise in game studies.

LEVELING THE THEORETICAL PLAYGROUND

Narrowing the theoretical divide between game studies and the transdisciplinary theories of noise in the humanities is the goal of an ongoing research project led by the authors of this paper. The first step was to collect a body of literature on noise, including 83 books, 10 edited books, 43 journal articles, 4 conference proceedings, and 10 doctoral theses. So far 25 books, 34 book chapters, and 14 academic articles have been subjected to a thematic analysis using a coding grid developed to identify the main theoretical themes of noise (see Figure 1).

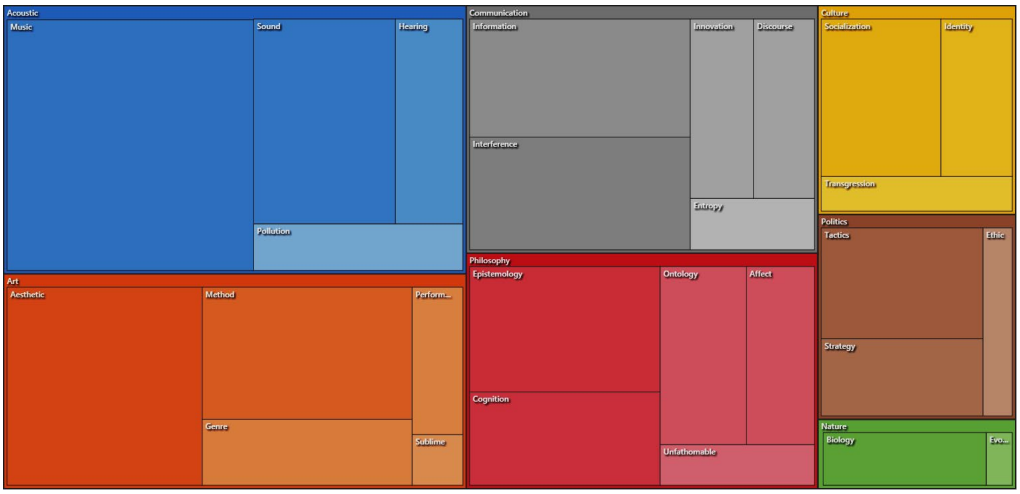

Figure 1: Chart visualizing the themes (and subthemes) observed in the body of literature. The size and color saturation of each rectangle represent the number of times a theme has been identified. Darker and bigger means more occurrences.

Following preliminary data analysis, three overarching and interrelated theoretical territories have come at the forefront (see Figure 2). The *affect territory* concerns noise as "a perturbing force-relation" (Thompson 2017, 42) whose erratic motion and destabilizing sensations expose and challenge the limits of a system. This is the realm of noise as extreme visceral disruption, cognitive and sensory overload, material obstacle, and psychomotor incapacity. The *apophasis territory* investigates noise as a negativity defined by opposition to phenomenon which it is not (Hegarty 2020, 211), therefore operating as a "relational concept" (Novak 2015, 126) and a "liminal event" (Cubitt 2017, 20). Here is the idea of noise as an epistemic violence caused by the "chaos of irrationality" (Hainge, 2013, 86-87), the loss of meaning, confusion, and uncertainty. The *(dis)order territory* conceptualizes the transformative potential of noise as an engine "of reorganization, disruption, and distraction" (Ballard 2011, 68)

sustaining a “process of continuous transformation” (Wilkins 2016, 39) between order, disorder, new order, and so on. This is the domain of noise as a space of transgression and experimentation to uncover new meanings, new aesthetics, new musical genres, new practices, etc.

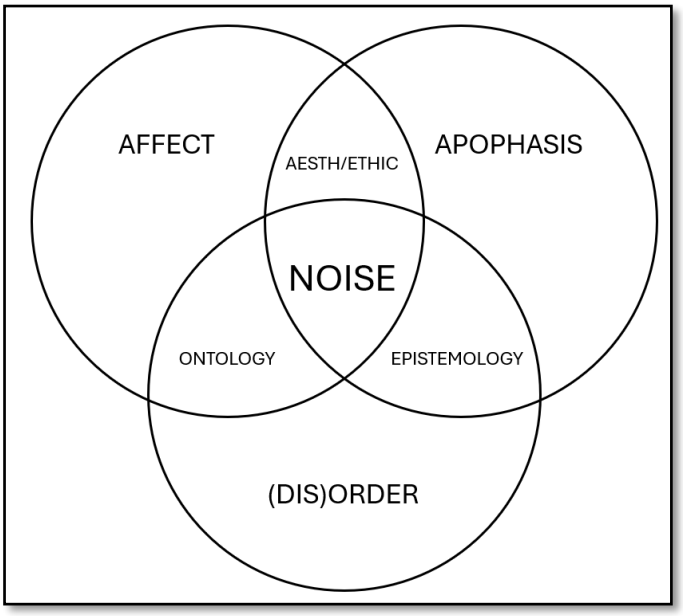

Figure 2: Diagram of the three main theoretical territories of noise in the humanities.

At the intersection of each territory, there are subdomains clarifying the capacity of noise as a concept. First, when the (in)corporeal response (*affect*) toward the otherness of noise (*apophasis*) challenges the limits of perception, noise generates unforeseen aesthetic experiences and new ethical considerations (*aesth/ethic*). This area can inform the analysis of videogames like *Cruelty Squad* (Consumer Softproducts, 2021), *Memory of a Broken Dimension* (xra, 2015), *AIeyes* (tm, 2024-), *Untitled Game* (JODI, 1996-2001), *Exit Mask* (Stef Pinto, 2019), and *Pillar of Rust* (Valerie Dusk, 2020) which transgresses design conventions to produce radical aesthetics that forces a critical reevaluation of how games, game creation, and gameplay are culturally codified.

Second, when the unfathomable nature of noise (*apophasis*) disrupts the rule-based order of a system (*dis/order*) and reveals the hidden processes, noise triggers an epistemic inquiry about the system, its limits, and the horizon of possibilities that lies beyond (*epistemology*). Transgressive forms of play such as glitching and griefing fit in this area for how they push game systems and gameplay to their point of rupture, thereby revealing new knowledge about their inner structures and creating the chaotic conditions for the emergence of new forms of play.

Finally, when the material and affective capacity of noise (*affect*) transforms a system through chaos (*dis/order*), noise operates as an autonomous, natural, and non-human entropic force (*ontology*). This area can help understand experiences where a game system (fictionally or physically) interferes, degrades, or prevents the possibility of play. Titles such as *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002)*, ROM Check Fail* (Jarrad Woods, 2008), *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016), *Calendula*

(Blooming Buds Studio, 2016), and *The Corridor* (Mackinnon, 2020) are good examples of this noisy process, as would be corrupted game software or damaged gaming technology or interface.

FATHOMING THE UNFATHOMABLE

The noise territories delineated in this paper highlighted several areas of inquiry where a theoretical framework tailored for the study of videoludic noise would become useful. The refinement of such a framework has the potential to expand the theoretical playground of game studies by offering new conceptual understandings and tools for the analysis of noisy game phenomena, thus empowering game scholars "to decipher a range of crucial issues concerning politics, aesthetics and cultural processes of [the video game] media" (Parikka 2012, 110). Meanwhile, future research is needed to bring a new theoretical order in the chaotic territories of videoludic noise.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://journals.openedition.org/sdj/4374