Ludo-spectatorship as gaming and metagaming: exploring the pleasures of assemblage

Xin Pan
University of Nottingham Ningbo China
199 Taikang East Road
Ningbo China
xin.pan@nottingham.edu.cn

Keywords

ludo-spectatorship, pleasure, metagaming, affect, assemblage, game objects

INTRODUCTION

Gameplay is always accompanied by a set of emotional, sensorial, and cognitive effects. Pleasure is a feeling that is closely connected with these reactions and that is generated throughout the gameplay process. It is an important concept for those who are interested in game design, game addiction, and gamification to understand why people engage with games. This project thus attempts to seek the provenance of these affective responses in contemporary videogame play. Additionally, with the rise of Esports tournaments and the popularity of game streaming, spectating has become a significant element of contemporary gameplay (Taylor, 2018; Egliston, 2020; Johnson & Jackson, 2022). However, gameplay spectating is not limited to watching Esports or game streams. This project will identify the spectations within and outside videogames, which I term *ludo-spectatorship*, and consider in what ways different forms of ludo-spectatorship create game pleasure.

RESEARCH SCOPE

This project aims to explore the relationship between ludo-spectatorship and pleasure. One object of study is the concept, roles, and effects of ludo-spectatorship. "Ludo-spectatorship" is coined by Espen Aarseth (2017) and is understood in a metaphorical way, as "experiencing play from critical positions" (p. 3). He creates a taxonomy to demonstrate different types of gameplay spectating in three dimensions (space, time, and action). For instance, the spectating mode of watching a particular football game on a field is local (space), synchronous (time), and direct (action). This taxonomy shows different spectating modes through which games can be spectated in a very broad sense. This project is circumscribed to ludo-spectatorship that happens between players and single-player videogames. Instead of presenting different modes, this research treats ludo-spectatorship as a relationship between gamers and videogames (mainly established by spectating). I define "ludo-spectatorship" as the practices involving spectating objects within, around, and outside videogames, which happen before, after, and during play.

The other object of analysis is game pleasure, which has been studied by many game designers and scholars (e.g., Zimmerman and Salen, 2003; LeBlanc, 2004; Järvinen, 2009), yet is still confusing. It is noted that some serious games can also arouse pleasure; some negative feelings (pain, frustration, anxiety) are equally important in contributing to the play of pleasure in games. Rather than simply being equated to happiness, game pleasure reflects an effect of intensity on the players. Drawing on Massumi's (2021) affect, pleasure here is defined as the salient affective response that player's experience from playing videogames, which is not just an emotional reaction, but also involves bodily, psychological, and intellectual sensations. It is derived through a complex interplay of the player's body, game mechanism, the feel of the game controller, the images, sounds, and other information shown on the screen. In this project, I restrict myself to describing a range of pleasures from gameplay, including delight, resonances, epiphany (as positive reactions) and nervousness, frustration, and suffering (as negative reactions).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND (HYPO)THESES

This project is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the concept of ludo-spectatorship and aims to answer: What is ludo-spectatorship and what is the difference between ludo-spectatorship and other forms of spectatorship? And what is the relationship between ludo-spectatorship and videogame play? I propose two forms of ludo-spectatorship based on the *objects being spectated* (such as game streams, characters, and landscapes): spectation *within* videogames and *outside* videogames. My first thesis is that ludo-spectatorship is not only a component of gaming (which I term "in-game spectation") but also a form of metagaming (which I term "spectating play") (see Figure 1). Metagaming is "a signifier for everything occurring before, after, between, and during games as well as everything located in, on, around, and beyond games" (Boluk and LaMieux, 2017, p. 11). As a practice outside videogames, watching game streams exemplifies metagaming; while spectation within videogames remains a way of gaming, as players must observe to play.
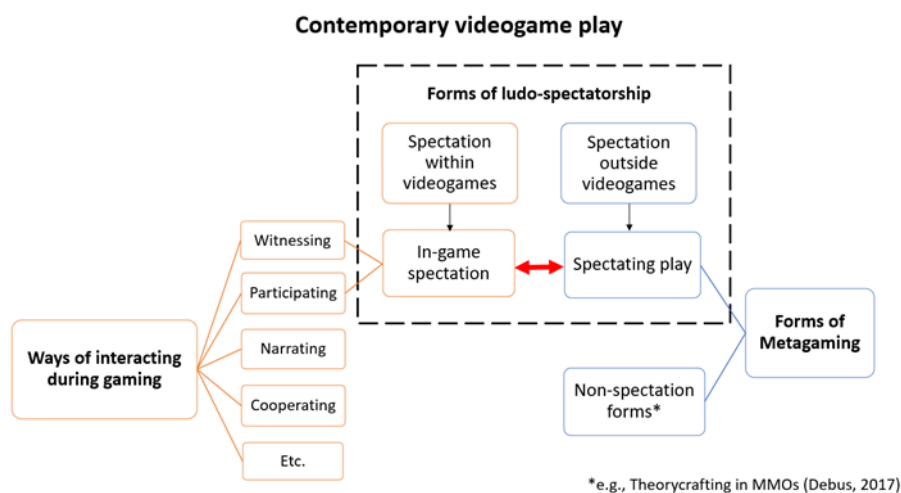

Figure 1: Relationship between ludo-spectatorship and videogame play

The second part of this project concentrates on the roles of each form of ludo-spectatorship through several case studies. The main research question for this part is what role does ludo-spectatorship play in generating videogame pleasure? The second thesis is that: in-game spectation and spectating play associate with each other; the pleasure of ludo-spectatorship is shaped by the tensions between witnessing and participating, and between in-game spectation and spectating play.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As shown above, ludo-spectatorship is about the relationship between different game objects and players. The forms of ludo-spectatorship depend on the objects spectated. For example, spectation within videogames is concerned with in-game objects, such as avatars, NPCs, and landscapes. These non-human objects, which also construct player's experience, are significant in producing videogame pleasure. Concerning their importance, this project is built on Taylor's assemblage of play (2009), while also drawing on relevant posthuman theories Actor-Network theory (ANT, Latour, 2005) and Object-Oriented ontology (OOO, Bogost, 2012; Morton, 2013; Harman, 2018). ANT suggests that both human and non-human actors are equally important, and they come together to form particular experiences or have effects. Recognizing videogame play as assemblages emphasizes their rhizomatic nature (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), which means their meanings and affects are constantly changing. In the case of game streams, which are the object being watched outside videogames, they challenge the relationship between players and videogames. As such, they offer the possibility to reconfigure feelings from the gameplay experience.

METHODOLOGY

This project employs "microethology", which is created by Seth Giddings. This is "a nonscientific, improvised, opportunistic approach to recording, describing, and analyzing brief moments of everyday technocultural activity" (Giddings, 2014, p. 149). "Micro" denotes that this study is concerned with momentary events that occur during playing and watching. "Ethology" is the study of behaviour that makes no assumptions about who or what is acting in particular events. This methodology emphasizes detailed observation and interpretation of (re)actions, behaviours, and emotional and bodily states. Its advantage lies in synthesizing both ethnographic and analytical methods. Thus, the methods used here include participant observation as well as textual analysis.

Specifically, I will first determine the main game object for each case study: the section of in-game spectation focuses on different in-game objects (avatar, monster, and landscape), and the section of ludo-spectatorship as metagaming looks at different types of game streams (explanatory, Danmaku videos, Let's Play, and Speedruns). For each case, I start by looking at a particular gameplay experience, which is recorded by observing my own playthrough, and then figure out the primary affective response from it. Then I will use the frame of assemblage to closely examine how this game object works with other actors to shape a particular experience, produce a certain affect, and then contribute to videogame pleasure.

REFERENCES

Aarseth, E. 2017. Spec Ops: The line between player and spectator in ludic entertainment. Paper presented at *Spectating Play*, Tampere, Finland, 24-25 April. https://pure.itu.dk/portal/files/84344293/AarsethSpecops.pdf

Bogost, I. 2012. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Boluk, S., & LeMieux, P. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Debus, M. 2017. Metagames: On the Ontology of Games Outside of Games. Paper presented at *the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '17)*, Hyannis, MA, USA, 14-17 August. https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102097

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. 2004. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia.* London: Continuum.

Egliston, B. 2020. "Seeing isn't doing": Examining tensions between bodies, videogames and technologies 'beyond' the game. *New media & society, 22*(6), 984–1003. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819875078

Giddings, S. 2014. *Gameworlds: virtual media and children's everyday play.* New York; London: Bloomsbury.

Harman, G. 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything.* UK: Penguin.

Järvinen, A. 2009. Understanding Video Games as Emotional Experiences. In *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* edited by B. Perron, and M. Wol, 85-108. New York: Routledge.

Johnson, M., & Jackson, N. 2022. Twitch, Fish, Pokémon and Plumbers: Game live streaming by nonhuman actors. *Convergence, 28*(2), 431–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856522107480

Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: And Introduction to Actor-Network Theory.* New York: Oxford University Press.

LeBlanc, M. et al. 2004. *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.* http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf

Massumi, B. 2021. *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation.* Twentieth anniversary edition. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morton, T. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Taylor, T. L. 2009. The Assemblage of Play. *Games and Culture, 4*(4), 331–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/155541200934357

Taylor, T. L. 2018. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Zimmerman, E., & Salen, K. 2003. *Rules of Play.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.