

Playgrounds of authority: space, power, and agency in *Dying Light*

Will McKeown

Birmingham City University
Birmingham, UK
will.mckeown@bcu.ac.uk

Poppy Wilde

Birmingham City University
Birmingham, UK
poppy.wilde@bcu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The application of Deleuzoguattarian frameworks (1987) can be seen in the scholarly contributions to theories of videogame play (Martin-Jones and Sutton 2007; Cremin 2015; Cremin 2016), authority (Dyer-Whitford and De Peuter 2009; Galloway 2006; Mukherjee 2015), and spatial composition (Taylor 2007; Wood 2012). Martin-Jones and Sutton (2007) note that videogame space is multidirectional, labyrinthine and non-linear, containing multiple interconnected elements. As such, these elements resemble the Deleuzean (1987) concept of the rhizome in their organisation. Cremin (2015) foregrounds the importance of player agency in the exploration, completion, and therefore necessarily co-creation of games. Spatial compositions can be explored in tandem with player agency in order to understand the meaning of the distribution of authority and agency through virtual space (see, for example, Bódi 2022). Drawing on Deleuzean concepts of space, Wood (2012) argues that the interaction between player action and their surroundings is generative of recursive space. This can be understood as the space generated through initial interactions between the player and their surroundings, a process that recurs in the progression of play (Wood 2012).

However, to date, the aforementioned Deleuzoguattarian contributions to the field have not addressed the problematic anthropocentrism of characterising agency exclusively from the position of the player. We argue that authority and agency exist as part of a virtual game-space as fluctuations between items, mobs, buildings landscapes, methods of traversal, non-player characters (NPCs) and more. This paper will therefore advance studies in this area by drawing on multiple Deleuzoguattarian concepts, relating them to *Dying Light* (Techland 2015), and drawing this back to questions of videogame agency, spatiality, and authority.

Dying Light is an open-world zombie survival game, where, as Kyle Crane, the player enters a quarantine zone in the fictional city of Harran. The game is known for its parkour free-running gameplay, where you can climb, run, and jump from buildings, and utilise, for example, trash piles to soften the fall from large heights. Different mutations of zombies appear throughout the game, and tasks are unlocked across a spectrum of survivors. Weapons are found and modified with extra items, yet have a diminishing durability, which can render them useless mid-fight.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

By drawing on the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), we will explore how authority is distributed and reconfigured across *Dying Light's* open world. As Honan (2007, 533 and 538) explains, “[r]hizomes do not have clearly identifiable beginnings and ends [...] There is no one, correct way through a rhizome”. Moreover, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). In *Dying Light*, the progression through the game and the levelling of the player, the different zombie mobs you encounter, as well as the difficulty setting that you choose, and the durability of weapons, all put the zombie and the human in an intricate dance which is not a singular hierarchy but depends on multiple factors.

The fluctuation of agency distributed across the world of *Dying Light* can also be mapped along a continuum showing different degrees of smooth and striated space. Striated space, confines movement “as by gravity to a horizontal plane, [...] limited by the order of that plane to preset paths between fixed and identifiable points” (Massumi 1987, xiii). Whereas smooth space is open-ended; “[o]ne can rise up at any point and move to any other” (Massumi 1987, xiii). In *Dying Light*, spaces are sometimes more defined – more accessible – dependent on the zombies that occupy them. For example, in the day, when the zombies have less power, the streets of Harran might be considered striated – they are generally quite fixed, with fixed behaviours from the biter zombies shambling through them that can leave the places fairly sedentary, and rule-driven. The biters do not necessarily pose a huge threat – they have some agency in that they shape how the player must react, but they can be easily avoided. Yet, other zombies can disrupt the sense of space and the normative rules that the biters convey. For example, the biters cannot climb and do not run, so spaces that were formerly safe – rooftops – become smoothed out – made more open to potentials – by the presence of the “Virals”, a different classification of zombie that is fast, and can climb. We therefore argue that gameplay in *Dying Light* constitutes the activation of smooth space, traversing and altering both restrictions and pathways in what can be described as rhizomatic play (Cremin 2015).

This further links to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of de- and re-territorialization (1987), which can loosely be understood as the reconfiguration of authorities over spaces or networks. In Harran, zombies have rewritten the cityscape with their own re-inscription of spaces. Places that were once safe are now surrounded or overrun with infected, and areas of actual safety are only made so through various traps, guards, and fortifications. The original purpose and classification of places has changed, in line with the threat the zombies in their various forms offer. Ultimately, the zombies are more in control than the player. However, the player can clear certain spaces from infected, and often does so to restore areas as “safe houses”. This serves to reinforce the de- and re-territorialization of the spaces as they are in flux through the game. Thus, in videogame worlds authority and territory are mapped and reconfigured in the process of play.

Drawing on Bódi’s (2022) work on spatial and explorative agency, we therefore explore how space, the traversal of it, and the occupation of it, by both zombie mobs and human-players is integral to the agencies at play within *Dying Light*. This paper will therefore contribute to studies within videogame space and place, power and authority, and the flux around agency, advancing the application of Deleuze and

Guattari in game studies by bringing them into closer contact with game texts and literature.

Keywords

agency, authority, power, Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomatic, space

REFERENCES

- Bódi, B. 2022. *Videogames and Agency*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Cremin, C. 2015. *Exploring Video Games with Deleuze and Guattari*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Cremin, C. 2016. "Molecular Mario: The Becoming-Animal of Video Game Compositions." *Games and Culture*, 11 (4), 441-458.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015569247>
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Massumi, B., Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. and de Peuter G. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Galloway, A. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Honan, E. 2007. "Writing a rhizome: an (im)plausible methodology." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20 (5), 531-546.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390600923735>
- Massumi, B. (1987) "Foreword." In *A Thousand Plateaus* by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, IX-XV. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mukherjee, S. 2015. *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sutton, D. and Martin-Jones, D. 2008. *Deleuze Reframed: A guide for the arts student*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.
- Taylor, T. L. 2007. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring online game culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Techland. 2015. *Dying Light*. Online Game. Techland.
- Wood, A. 2012. "Recursive space: Play and creating space." *Games and Culture*, 7 (1), 87-105.