Watching different play styles:
The pleasure of transgressive play
in *Tears of the Kingdom*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Exploring different play styles is where the distinct pleasure of videogames lies. However, it can be difficult for an individual player to experience the multitude of styles on their own. Spectating game streams provides a window into how different players engage with specific games. According to Boluk and LeMieux (2017), stream watching can be viewed as metagaming, the practice around games, which reveals how players creatively manipulate the original game system through their unique play styles. This paper explores a type of game stream showcasing play styles that are typically not anticipated by game designers. This particular style of play, termed transgressive play (Aarseth, 2007), subversive play (Flanagan, 2009), or transformative play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), springs out of "the players' norm-breaking and convention-challenging actions" (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020, p. 8). According to Aarseth (2007), transgressive play challenges the idea that there are implied players who are inscribed into a game, and thus is crucial for understanding game culture.

I term this form of streams as transgressive play streams, and this research aims to understand: How can we conceptualize and study transgressive play streams? What novel experiences emerge from watching these streams? In what ways does stream viewing contribute to the pleasure of play? This paper addresses these questions through a case study. In doing so, this study rethinks the rules of play and the concept of transgressive play. Building on this, I further propose that streams featuring transgressive play bring a unique pleasure regarding a particular videogame, which is entirely different from the pleasure derived from playing the game itself.
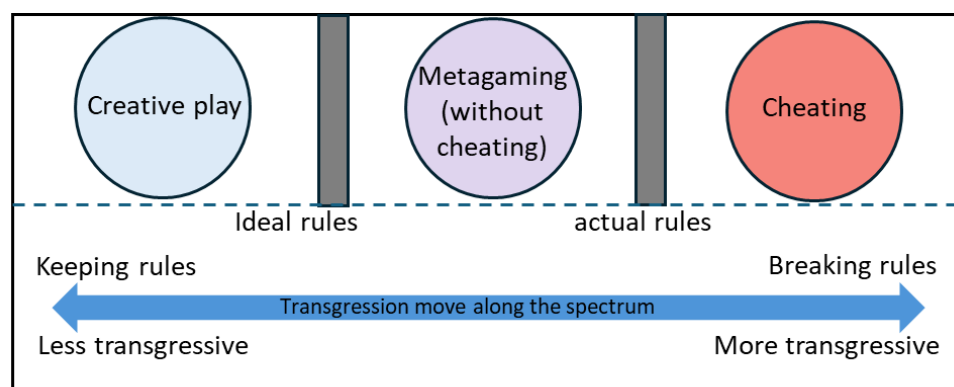
Specifically, the paper examines the pleasure evoked by transgressive gameplay streams in the context of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (TotK) (Nintendo, 2023). This research draws on a data collection of three hundred TotK transgressive play streams. These streams were collected from a Chinese streaming platform called Bilibili and online community forums including Weibo, Twitter, and Reddit between May 2023 and May 2024. These streams were identified using the keywords "tears of the kingdom" (王国之泪 in Chinese), "trolling for content" (整活 in Chinese), "creative" (新奇 in Chinese), "innovative" (创新 in Chinese), "unexpected" (超乎想象 in Chinese), and "glitch" (邪道 in Chinese), making sure they feature innovative, subversive, or transgressive gameplay content. The selection was based on their popularity, which is measured by views counts and likes. A mixed-method is used to examine the game streams, drawing upon both online observation and content analysis.

Consequently, I first created a transgressive play spectrum, indicating varying degrees of transgression in gameplay (see Figure 1). The spectrum progresses through increasing levels of rule violation within the game. There are two kinds of rules serving as pivotal demarcation points on the spectrum: (1) *Ideal rules* denote the game designer's expectations for players that they must meet for the game to exercise its effect. These rules are often reflected in a game's official guidebook (after Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). (2) *Actual rules* refer to certain conventions formed by players' actual gameplay activities. For instance, David Myers (2008) described his experience of being ostracized by other players in the MMO *City of Heroes/City of Villains* for ignoring player-created social rules, even though he followed the formal rules set by the game.

Then, three main categories of transgressive play streams are identified, ranging from *creative play*, through *metagaming (without cheating)*, to *cheating*.

Cheating streams encompass content where streamers violate actual rules. These actions are usually considered problematic within the broader play community, as they threaten to undermine the coherence and shared appreciation of play experiences. The use of cheat codes, for example, is generally unaccepted in conventional gameplay (Kücklich, 2008). In cheating streams, streamers typically exploit game's glitches, bugs, and mods to achieve specific objectives.

Figure 1: Spectrum of transgressive play streams

Metagaming streams (without cheating) demonstrate how streamers challenge ideal rules while simultaneously playing within actual rules. In accordance with TotK's official guidelines, its ideal rules can be summarized as to explore new lands, to create inventions, and to discover new ways to build and combat. However, rather than playing TotK itself by following these guides, metagaming streamers playing *with* this game by incorporating other games within it. Glitchless speedrunning exemplifies this: speedrunners break the game's narrative structure to complete it as quickly as possible.

Creative play streams showcase players explore unexpected gameplay possibilities within ideal rules. At the Game Developers Conference 2024, TotK developers expressed their surprise at players' unanticipated creations, such as sticking multiple logs together to help players reach their desired areas. The creativity of these streams primarily lies in combining in-game objects in novel and unpredictable ways.

These streams prompt a reconsideration of the notions of transgressive and rules. To frame creative play streams as transgressive, it is essential to clarify what "transgressive" entails in this context. In other words, what kinds of boundaries these streams cross. Drawing on Gregersen (2005), I argue that games function through both explicit and implicit rules. Explicit rules are clearly defined for players, while implicit rules that are presupposed by the game structure may not be *extracted* by game designers. To demonstrate this, I revise the spectrum of transgressive play stream by incorporating implicit and explicit indicators (see Figure 2). However, the area representing implicit rules should not be reduced to *rules* but is better known as a possibility space or hidden affordance in the virtual content of videogames that were not intended to be present, such as exploits. Here, creative play streams' transgressive nature manifests in their unanticipated use of exploits that game developers did not know existed.

From this perspective, I suggest that transgressive play is understood as exploration of a game's unpredictability rather than merely as rule breaking. Specifically, cheating streams derive the unpredictability from uncovering glitches, which are singularities "*within* a game system", whereas the unpredictability of creative play emerges from exploring exploits, singularities constructed "at the intersections *between* game systems" (Johnson, 2019, p. 124)—each system functions as intended, but together they produce something new.
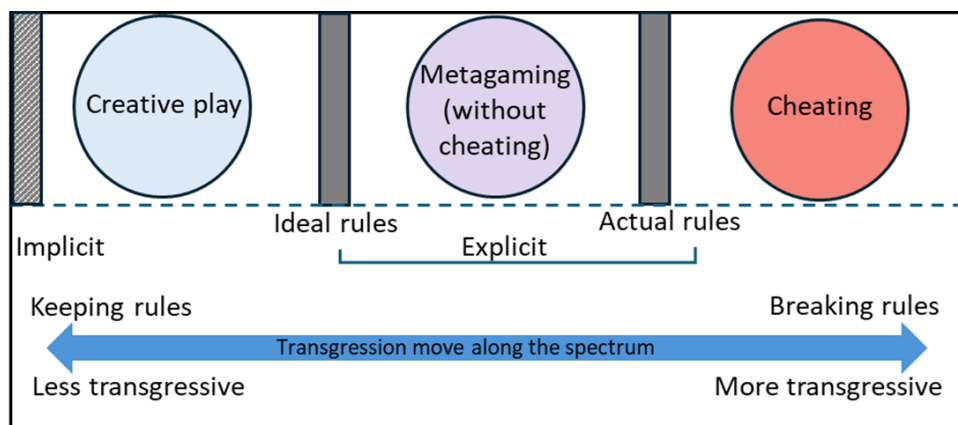

Figure 2: Revised Spectrum of transgressive play streams

The unpredictability of videogame play contributes to the understanding of the pleasure derived from watching transgressive play streams. These transgressive play streams provide two interrelated pleasures: the pleasure of destruction and the pleasure of discovery. Transgressive play deconstructs the intended player-object and player-game relationships, the game's narrative structure, and even the ontology of the game itself. This destructive behavior, in turn, enables the discovery of the game's hidden affordances and emergent possibilities, encouraging a creative reconstruction of the gameplay experience. For instance, speedrunners create a challenge external to the gameworld, where they, rather than act as the main character Link, become the hero of their own narrative.

By transforming private play into public performance, game streams possess an inherent performativity. It is insufficient to only take account of the transgressive content when studying the pleasure of stream viewing. The streamer's performance acts as a catalyst, amplifying the enjoyment derived from these streams. Additionally, the communicative interfaces offered by streaming platforms direct the viewer's attention towards the non-diegetic space, ensuring recognition of the streamer's performance.

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