

Alternative localities: Queering Time and Space through Videogame Play

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INTRODUCTION

By using a queer theoretical lens, my PhD thesis looks at how videogame play has the potential to create “alternative” localities in time and space. Through engagement with scholarship in queer and game studies alongside my own primary research, I explore how spaces and temporalities can enact queerness through play. To illustrate the queer potentialities of videogames I will engage with a range of ethnographic research methods including, material culture analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I will unite the findings of my research with theoretical frameworks developed from the synthesis of notable queer tempo-spatial literature (Ahmed, 2006; Edelman, 2004; Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2019). In doing so, I will adapt these scholars works to craft new theoretical considerations of what queer times and spaces mean under the context of videogame play.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

In the context of this thesis, queer time and space is a challenge to the dominant understandings of space and time which position certain ways of life as natural and legitimate. Everyday life is organised around rhythms and routines which occur accordance with heterosexual procreation and full-time employment (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005). A queer space-time, by contrast, exists beyond these structures to produce alternative experiences. As a result, queerness departs from a focus on sexual normativity towards normativity within temporal and spatial operation (Freccro, 2007: 489).

Queerness can also be played. Playing queerly engages in non-normative play practices that evoke unconventional experiences and pleasures (Chang, 2017; Harper et al., 2018; Ruberg, 2019). Here, play can potentially release ‘players from the restrictions of everyday reality but also encourages them to think in terms of parallel worlds, extended realities, and frivolous pursuits’ (Halberstam, 2017: 187). As a result, I understand how engaging with videogames can create and construct queer times and spaces. This entails sites orientated around alternativeness. Whether that be

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within and outside game structures, queerness can craft an existence that is out of the ordinary, pulling participants away from while simultaneously challenging many normative systems (e.g. mastery, progression, completion).

METHODS

All experiences of videogame play are surrounded by an entanglement or assemblage of digital and material contexts: our corporeal and digital bodies, the surfaces and dimensions of input interfaces, game worlds and our off-screen environments. As a result, my use of methods needs to adapt to the multifaceted nature of how queerness emerges in play. My methodological approach has evolved as a response to the different contexts of meaning making that emerged during discussions of play.

The findings presented in my thesis incorporate data gathered from a mixed-method approach; material cultural analysis using object interviews, ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews. Because I have used a mixed-method approach, each chapter discusses a specific approach to examine how queer play becomes enacted. This is not to say each chapter presents a different “case study” resulting from different approaches, but rather, each follows a detailed exploration of how queer play becomes brought to life in different ways. As a result, all chapters connect queerness to play through various hinges. These hinges can be input devices, virtual embodiments as well as the everyday domestic contexts that surround play. Each chapter follows a detailed exploration of how queer play becomes brought to life in different ways.

To recruit players for observations I placed a call for participants in specific online servers and chatrooms, particularly ones that focus on non-normative play practices. For interviews I recruited participants through a process of snowball sampling that utilizes my social networks as an avid videogame player. This will be used to establish initial contacts to then gain a chain of participants. To maintain the comfort and safety of my participants they will all be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. They have also been informed of their rights to withdraw consent at any time.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

Chapter 1: Material Culture and Object interviews

Arguably, the first and most bodily experience of play occurs when individuals touch controllers. Input devices tie players to the virtual worlds their onscreen avatars inhabit. Here, I understand that when players utilize alternative controllers (experimental input devices) their approach to play is also alternative. Taking a phenomenological approach, I understand how alternative controllers provoke different experiences of affect, touch and movement (Keogh, 2018; Stark, 2020). As a result, this chapter looks at how approaches to control are orientated around soft (as opposed to hardcore) sensibilities when players are confronted with controllers that disrupt previously established and mastered literacies.

Chapter 2 – Ethnographic Observations: Queer Play in Action

Moving away from the objects, this chapter utilizes observations to address how queerness is experienced within the systems and structures of game play. Within each

small act of play there are affective and experiential meanings that imply how a game is moved through and interacted with. This evokes a complex reciprocal relationship between players embodied encounters and the mechanical systems that structure games. This section explores players' relationships with virtual space and time and how it can be challenged and reimagined. It explores how players push spatial borders that police what is "fixed", working and normal in game worlds. More specifically, I address a small community of players who share a proclivity to break virtual space by leaving pre-designed digital maps.

Chapter 3- Semi-Structured Interviews: Play in Everyday lifeworld's

To take a closer look at how queer play becomes lived, embodied and encountered I focus in this chapter on interview data, where the "home" was discussed as the primary location of playful activity. More specifically, I address how play emerges in the everyday context of domestic space as a disruptive force to the dominant cultural imaginaries of "the home". Seemingly banal considerations of what room in the home play took place in, at what time of day and with whom emerged via the interviews as ways to understand play as an everyday practice enmeshed with queer potential. Overall, this chapter shows that gaming can challenge and transform the social and spatial structures of everyday home life but also the broader cultural imagination of the home.

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