

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

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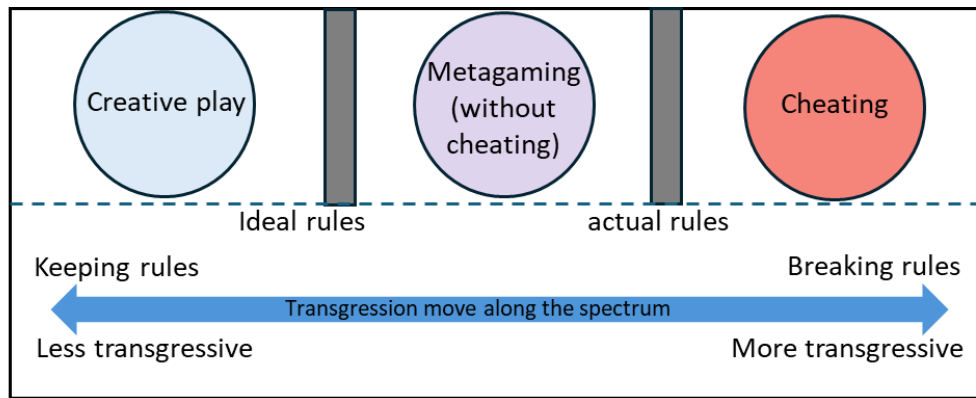
INTRODUCTION

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. This paper explores the game streams that showcase unexpected, creative, and transgressive play styles, those typically not anticipated by game designers. Such play, termed transgressive play (Aarseth, 2007), subversive play (Flanagan, 2009), or transformative play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), is crucial to understanding all forms of gameplay (Aarseth, 2007). Through a case study, this paper argues 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. To analyze these game streams, I view them as a form of what Boluk and LeMieux's (2017) called metagaming, the practice around games, which reveals how players creatively manipulate the original game system through their unique play styles.

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). Drawing on hundreds of TotK game streams on platforms, including Bilibili and forums at Weibo, Twitter, and Reddit, 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. (2) *Actual rules* refer to certain conventions formed by players' actual gameplay activities. Cheating, for example, is usually not accepted in the conventional sense (Kücklich, 2008). Then, three main categories of transgressive play streams are identified, ranging from creative play (exploring unexpected gameplay possibilities within the ideal rules), through metagaming (without cheating) (playing beyond designer's expectations while within the actual rules), to cheating (violating the actual rules through exploiting glitches and cheats).

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E.G: Create unexpected stuffs in a game Glitchless speedruns Use cheat codes

Figure 1. Spectrum of transgressive play streams

These transgressive 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 the 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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