

Sketch for a Phenomenology of Gameplay (as) Performance: Bodies, Systems, Worlds

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INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract reports ongoing work that develops a phenomenological account of gameplay (as) performance. The project brings performance studies and game studies into a single analytic frame to explain how embodied action, systemic constraints, and distributed spectatorship organise contemporary digital play. Existing debates on liveness and mediation (Auslander, 1999; Chvasta, 2005; Dixon, 2007; Fenske, 2004; Phelan, 1993) have established important foundations for thinking about digital performance, but they do not yet capture how gameplay reorganises embodiment and presence. At the same time, early attempts to understand games through dramatic or narrative paradigms (Laurel, 1991; Murray, 1997) reproduce assumptions that ludological critiques have shown to be limiting (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Eskelinen, 2001; Frasca, 2003). This work takes these tensions as a starting point.

Game studies has already demonstrated that gameplay involves embodied, kinesthetic, and affective dimensions that exceed representational frameworks (Calleja, 2011; Farrow & others, 2014; Gee, 2008; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Keogh, 2018; Lankoski, 2016). Structural distinctions such as Juul's progression versus emergence (2003) show how games produce different experiential horizons, while hermeneutic accounts highlight the materiality of in-game elements before their

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representational meaning (Aarseth, 2009; Bogost, 2008; Galloway, 2004; Möring, 2013). These lines of thought align with Fischer-Lichte's description of performance's self-referentiality and material presence (2008) but point to a different source of constraint and consequence: the procedural systems of the game itself.

A key concept guiding this project is the "gameplay condition" (Leino, 2009). It describes how rule-based systems establish an existential baseline for interpretation. Players act within worlds that impose risks, limitations, and consequences independent of player intention. This produces a form of vulnerability that differs from the corporeal grounding of traditional performance (Fischer-Lichte 2008) but nevertheless structures meaning through exposure to system-imposed failure. Research in digital embodiment (Gregersen & Grodal, 2008; Klevjer, 2012; Leirfall, 2013) further shows that players do not leave embodied experience behind; rather, it becomes reorganised across interfaces, avatars, and algorithmic processes. The ongoing project examines how spectators recognise and respond to this reorganisation, and how such recognition becomes a source of tension, pleasure, and empathetic alignment.

Gameplay practices today move across multiple platforms. Actions performed in a game engine may be watched live through streaming platforms, observed in a physical venue, or encountered later in edited form. These hybrid arrangements challenge assumptions that performance depends on a single spatial or temporal field. Dixon's account of liveness as phenomenological "now-ness" (2007, 129) is especially relevant here: liveness in gameplay arises from the alignment of embodied effort, algorithmic risk, and spectatorship, regardless of physical co-presence.

To analyse these conditions, the project develops an existential configuration model organised around four dimensions: body, space, time, and world. Each dimension describes how performers and spectators relate to one another and to the system that structures action.

Two examples illustrate how the model operates. In *Dead-in-Iraq* (DeLappe, 2006), both performer and spectator may inhabit the same game world under identical systemic constraints. The gameplay condition produces symmetric vulnerability: the possibility of being expelled or killed in the military recruitment game is present for anyone situated in that world. The performer's act of typing the names of deceased soldiers gains its force not through dramaturgy but through the systemic and affective conditions shared with the audience. Co-presence here is algorithmic as much as embodied. By contrast, *Mega GIRP* (Wilson, 2011) depends on asymmetry. The performer's physical struggle—stretching, reaching, contorting to press keys—appears arbitrary without knowledge of the game system. For spectators familiar with the gameplay condition, each movement is read as a negotiation with risk. The meaning of the gesture is inseparable from the threat of in-game failure. This produces a form of recognition that is specific to digital play: the spectator aligns their own sense of restriction and possible pleasure with the performer's struggle inside the system. Embodiment is present on both sides of the screen, but it is mediated differently for performer and spectator.

The spatial dimension of the model accounts for how performers and spectators access and navigate game worlds. In *Dead-in-Iraq*, spatial access may be symmetric; in *Mega GIRP*, spectators are excluded from the game world and must read meaning from the performer's body. The temporal dimension distinguishes cases where

performer and spectator share a live timeline from those shaped by asynchronous viewing or pre-authored content. These temporal configurations influence how tension and identification unfold.

The world dimension draws together these analyses. Precarity of existence describes how performers and spectators face different vulnerabilities within a game world. Additional struggles include ludic challenges and fictional pressures that structure the experiential texture of performance. Juul's (2002) account of emergent play, Bogost's (2008) procedural affordances, and Galloway's (2004) attention to action layer into this dimension. Together, they clarify how meaning emerges from the interplay between embodied action and algorithmic structure.

This ongoing work contributes to performance studies by extending concepts of embodiment, co-presence, and liveness into environments shaped by algorithms and platforms. It contributes to game studies by offering a phenomenological account of gameplay as performance that does not rely on dramatic analogies but instead foregrounds systemic, embodied, and world-specific conditions. The model identifies how bodies, systems, pleasures, and vulnerabilities align in gameplay, and how these alignments become legible as performance across contemporary digital cultures.

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