

Aesthetics and Cosmetic Microtransactions in *Path of Exile*

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Jacques Rancière's notion of *aesthetic regime of art* and Nicholas Bourriaud's idea of *relational aesthetics* to assess the role of aesthetics microtransactions in *Path of Exile* (2013-, Grinding Gear Games). Three main roles of aesthetics microtransactions are concerned: 1) signifiers in social, in-game interaction between players 2) awards which motivate specific practices of play and 3) tools of agency used outside the conventional play frame. The main claim of the paper is that the aesthetic layer of the game, while formally disconnected, nevertheless governs the practices of play and constructs underpinnings for game's post-release cycle.

Keywords

aesthetics, action RPG, microtransactions, Jacques Rancière, Nicholas Bourriaud, *Path of Exile*

INTRODUCTION

The main research area presented in this paper refers to the aesthetic microtransactions (further referred to as the MTXs) in the computer aRPG *Path of Exile* (2013-, Grinding Gear Games [further referred to as the GGG]). According to the Steam statistics, *Path of Exile* is currently the most popular online action-RPG game played worldwide, with the recent expansion *Atlas of Worlds* launching this year in China. Its successful *free-to-play* model of distribution relies heavily on paid modifications which predominantly are aimed to enhance or alter the game interface. The microtransactions can be divided into three main categories: inventory management enhancements, social- and avatar management enhancements, and aesthetic microtransactions. The goal of this paper is to investigate the third category, which entirely revolves around the market centered on graphic effects altering the in-game visuals of players' avatars and their „private” space within the game world, called „hideout”.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In my analysis, I would like to use two different concepts of aesthetics – and work of art – by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) and Jacques Rancière (2004, 2009) to interpret the dichotomous approach to the aesthetic microtransactions as crucial elements of gameplay experience, which both co-construct the social relations between the players in the game world, and serve as an important element of curated system of rules regulating the discourses on a

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players' in-game status, an esthetic taste or a possible ideological stance. The research material is based on a six months period of participatory observation, including data obtained in-game, on the official *Path of Exile* Reddit boards and on the official game's forum. Some of Bourriaud's theories, e.g. the concept of postproduction art, were used to assess video game's art as a separate phenomenon (see Sharp 2015, p. 14). Here, I would like to refer to his ideas in the broader context of the framework for re-thinking the role of particular art pieces (namely the MTXs) which are obtainable and usable in-game. The key concept which links both Rancière and Bourriaud's take on art practice is the space. When Rancière refers to the political potential of both sublime and relational art, he writes that "the specificity of art consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space". Building on this trope, I would frame both avatars and hideouts as forms of signifying spaces, referring to them in a sense of specific "interface techniques". According to Apperley and Clemens, "the first crucial aspect (...) is that avatars should not be defined or cataloged according to the range of forms that they assume, but as an indissociable fusion of (technical) function and (user) action" (2017, p. 46). I would like to follow their broad understanding of the avatar and extend it to the *Path of Exile*'s hideouts, as it helps to capture the uniqueness of strategies involved in aesthetically modifying these parts of on-screen spaces: "whatever focuses attention, signals location, and enables the elaboration of intentions within a screen environment should also be considered an avatar" (2017, p. 46).

To achieve consistency with the theories used in this article, I would refer to the Rancière's definition of aesthetics as "not the name of a discipline, [but rather] a name of the specific regime for the identification of art" (Rancière 2009, p. 8). As I primarily deal with the graphic user interface, I would also adopt the concept of aesthetics as "a general regime of visibility" and "the intelligibility of art and a mode of interpretative discourse that itself belongs to the forms of this regime" (Rancière 2009, p. 11)

Claire Bishop, one of the most prominent critics of Bourriaud's theory, accuses his approach of "misdirecting" the already established notion of "open-ended" work of art as an event constructed by artists and audiences alike. Bishop's negative appraisal of relational aesthetics states that it values author's intentionality rather than audience empowerment (see Bishop 2004, p. 62). Furthermore, it is said that Bourriaud's take on art effectively reduces its role to Althusserian *ideological state apparatus*, because its role is not to comment on existing social and power relations, but rather produce them (see Bishop 2004, p. 63). Bishop also identifies the key features of relational art works, stating that they "seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated collectively rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption" (Bishop 2004, p. 54). As a consequence, relational art aims to establish a community among the art's recipients, and tries to make for the lack of interpersonal contacts in the market based entirely on the Internet-mediated dependences. This model also fits the needs of gaming communities in online games where multiplayer mode is not the default (i.e. most economically optimal) way of participating in the game. I would argue that in such cases, as in the *Path of Exile*, there is a

need to establish another layer of interaction, be it inside or outside of the gameplay, which will serve as a social glue and a common denominator – point of reference for the players’ community. Even the strongest competitive gaming franchises offer the players some form of aesthetic respite from the repetitive and highly formalized gameplay mechanics in the forms of cosmetic skins system (*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *League of Legends*) or customizable appearances of in-game buildings and objects (*StarCraft II* series). Thus Bishop’s critique adds to my understanding of *relational aesthetics* in the context of an online action RPG. The use of aesthetics MTXs would therefore be *relational* in a programmed sense, as a part of design strategy implemented by the GGG to prevent players retention in the post-release life cycle of the game.

STRUCTURE AND PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The study of avatars is perhaps one of the most researched areas in regard to video games’ interfaces, including a full spectrum of theoretical approaches from the monadic interaction theory (Lin 2013), through the visual engagement studies (Black 2017) to the postcolonial critique approach (Hammar 2015; Mukherjee 2017). This paper focuses solely on the aesthetic modifications of the avatars and hideouts which are disconnected from game mechanics, thus contributing to the gameplay in an indirect way and serving one of the three main roles: 1) signifiers in social, in-game interaction between players 2) awards which motivate specific practices of play and 3) tools of agency used outside the conventional play frame. The rationale behind this three-fold structure is based on the focus of this study, which is directed at an intersection between individual aesthetic expression and collective forms of shaping or imposing aesthetics practices. In this research I deliberately omitted practices which involve violation of the GGG terms of service, such as real-money MTX trading.

I treat both avatars and “hideout” areas in the same way in a sense that they follow the same rules of customization and share the same constrains in relation to the game rules, and are primarily signifiers thanks to their aesthetic properties. Hideouts are gated behind specific interaction patterns with selected group of NPCs called “masters”, which pre-define the initial tile set of a hideout and allow to place a set number of different “crafting benches”, objects which serve a dedicated purpose in the game mechanics, allowing for upgrades and alterations of the previously obtained items.

Before proceeding to the main topic, it is necessary to clarify the rationale behind two methodological assumptions made in this article. First, there is a noticeable discrepancy in the game studies research concerning RPG genre, heavily favoring the analysis of MMO RPGs. This article appropriates some of the research conducted on this subgenre to the analysis of online action-RPG titles, as many gameplay patterns remain similar in both cases. Second, justification for applying the category of aesthetic to video games, as well as a discussion whether digital games can or cannot be considered art, are both entirely omitted. The aim of this paper is not to assess the validity of such claims (see Deen 2011; Hutchison 2008), but to analyze and interpret the gameplay practices revolved around aesthetics prerogatives in the form of

value judgements which subsequently form a cohesive framework for formulating aesthetic claims within a particular community – I would argue that such approach not only lies at the foundation of Bourriaud’s *relational aesthetic*, but also establishes a scaffolding for Jacques Ranciere’s *regime of visibility*, as well as for numerous analysis of video game aesthetics (see Bateman 2015 p. 391; Karhulahti 2011).

SOCIAL SIGNIFIERS

According to Bourriaud, thanks to the nature of exhibitions, art offers “the possibility of an immediate discussion” (p. 16). The public display of MTXs offers similar opportunities, albeit the context is often transferred from the in-game social interaction to the community forums and discussion boards, where the communication tools offer better technological affordances for active participation and forming of aesthetical judgements. There are several studies which propose reading of the act of play as a type of a (neo)liberal self-fashioning practice (Möring & Leino, 2016, Zhu 2015). My take on MTXs in the role of social signifiers is partially compatible with such observations, mainly because the modifications in the *Path of Exile* offer the promise of customization which exceeds the linear progression of levels and skills. Some MTXs are awarded while completing a set number of challenges in a given league, which opens the opportunity to achieve desired aesthetics results without spending money on microtransactions. What is perhaps even more important, there is hardly no attempt from the GGG to adjust the MTXs according to the level of difficulty to obtain them. As a consequence, a community-acclaimed “blue eyes effect” introduced during the Harbinger League was effectively much easier to obtain than a visually elaborated, but not that sough-after helm or character aura effect¹. What is more, the option to “look ugly” is perceived very positively, at least given the evidence found on the *Path of Exile* Reddit channels². The ability to obtain particular MTXs which allow for individual self-realization, even if their functionality is limited only to aesthetical appearance, remains a strong incentive towards the initial struggle through the first levels of action-RPG gameplay. Quoting Möring and Leino,

“In other words, the liberal subject is a player, spurred through the tedious grind of early levels by the (possibly false) promise of authentic self-realization before the endgame.” (Möring & Leino, 2016, p. 5)

The social context of displaying individual choice of MTXs as a signifying tool also refers to the specific type of gameplay that the *Path of Exile* offers. Bourriaud’s arguments that “the general mechanization of social functions gradually reduces the relational space” (p. 17) and “professional behaviour patterns are modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them” resonates very well with the increasing automatization of social interaction in the *Path of Exile* and other online RPGs. The analyzed title is a paramount example of this, with the relatively easy-to-use modes of script-based altering the gameplay interface on the basis of desired *visibility* of items appearing in the game space, as in the case of customizable *loot filter* programs. Moreover, the question of desired player interaction often appears in the community’s discussions regarding the process of trading. It is ironically evoked in the

topics pertaining the poor design of the in-game trading system. Interestingly, the players' complaints can be summarized as desiring more of *automatic-play* (de Paoli 2013), i.e. in establishing a more convenient way to trade without the need for player-to-player interaction, preferably through some form of an auction house. On the other hand, the skill and knowledge needed to apply available self-automating programs (such as trade macro) are praised in line with T.L. Taylor's qualities of *instrumental play* (2009) as signifiers of an efficient and dedicated player.

Aesthetics is therefore strictly related to the various economies. First and foremost, to the "standard" economy of the in-game trade; second, to the economy of time investment; third – to the social economy of player interaction. Bourriaud's argument for relational aesthetics is to create "free time" zones which "contrast with those structuring everyday life" (p. 16) during the exhibition events; and such is the role of "exhibition events" in regard to MTX contests and displays in the paratextual media such as Reddit or game's official forums – to give respite from the laborious grind-based design of the core gameplay. It is, however, a project of relational aesthetics used in service of sustaining players' attention to the product, and to persuade them to spend resources (mainly gameplay time) in order to obtain the promised "self-fashioning" moment eventually to come.

Thus, in a way, the ultimate goal of the game would not be to achieve high level, develop successful character build or obtain high-end items. It is rather to succeed in a socially constructed race for self-expression, even if the aforementioned means are necessary to achieve the desired ends. This aesthetic of "self-fashioning" paradox manifests vividly in the discussion about the change introduced in the 3.1.0³ version of the game regarding the experience gained by the characters in the last five levels. After obtaining level 95, the player's character receives drastically diminished experience returns. Given the usual time constraints of the duration of the leagues (up to four months), this effectively prevents the vast majority of playerbase from achieving the higher level values. Despite the fact that in-game profits from the additional levels after level 90 are negligible compared to the other available means of character empowerment, the issue of this "XP nerf" remained a topic of a heated debate on the main community discussion boards. Even though most of the players admitted that in fact they have never reached level 100 even once in their *PoE* gaming history, there was a vast outcry regarding the loss of a *possibility* of achieving such in-game goal. In a way, the game denies the *right to fantasize* of a goal rather than straight forwardly denying access to the goal as such. The only tangible in-game award for achieving level 100 in a set time frame remains entirely in the realm of aesthetics: successful players are awarded by a rare set of MTXs and a right to have their nickname colored on the official *Path of Exile* forum boards.

In this instance the *relational aesthetics* crosses paths with Rancière's aesthetics regime, constructing not only negotiable space for gameplay aesthetic to be discussed and shared, but also inscribing it to an evaluated and institutionally governed system of rules. Rancière connects the *mimesis*, *poiesis* and *aesthesis* in a triangle which main purpose is to evaluate an

identification of something as art (Rancière p. 8). Analogically, in game telling a certain story (of achieving highest possible level) must be done persuasively through following a certain pre-established set of rules of doing it (as others are ineffective, see the “XP nerf” – this can be attributed to *poiesis*), which affects *aesthesis* (a way of being – the model through which the meaning-making is done, both in- and outside of the game itself). Therefore, aesthetics message sent by the MTXs used by a given player serves a role that cannot be reduced to merely displaying one’s wealth or demonstrating commitment – each of them is relative to the externally and socially negotiable norms (*relational*), but nevertheless remains internally regulated (*regime*) through the manipulation of the core game mechanics.

In-game hideouts serve an important role in the game, mainly as places where trading is being done. Player interaction outside of few guilds and dedicated racers is done through one player visiting the hideout of another player, and inevitably being confronted with the display of aesthetic taste. Hideout decoration competitions are held analogically to avatar-based ones, but their results⁴ do not reveal their potential as places where very direct political messages may be brought up. It is not uncommon to find hideouts decorated in symbols resembling swastikas⁵. They are generally disregarded as being in “poor taste”, but an open discussion about reporting such occurrences refers back to the GGG’s Terms of Use⁶.

AWARDS

Path of Exile is an interesting example of negotiation between the public and the private. Despite the Internet access requirement and a server-based structure, it cannot be attributed to the MMO genre. Moreover, the Grinding Gear Games still occasionally uses the label of an “indie” company, carefully maintaining the „hardcore-gamer friendly” image. At the same time, the financial model revolves entirely around the cosmetic MTXs, and attractive visuals are slowly becoming one of the company’s proprieties when it comes to future engine upgrades⁷. Aesthetics, while seemingly detached from the mechanical intricacy of the core gameplay (as defined by Mäyrä, 2008), takes command.

Path of Exile differs from the MMORPGs on several layers, but perhaps the most important one is the lack of three „most basic gameplay operations: accumulation (the grind), coordination (the raid), and communication (scripting)” as enumerated by Silverman and Simon (2009, p. 355). From this list, only the first point is applicable, although its scope far exceeds even the very broad understanding of the term „grind” in the MMO games. In the *Path of Exile*, the process of accumulation is largely centered on individual progress through the game content, followed closely by obtaining sufficient economic power. This power, however, can be subsided by the capital of knowledge (see Bourdieu 1984) regarding the optimal strategies of game play. Contrary to the MMOs, the social aspect is not as crucial for the effectiveness of power gaming; there are very few instances which require in-game player cooperation to exceed in a particular area – such is the case of race to level 100 at the beginning of each „league”, where players start from scratch and aim to progress through the game content as fast as possible. However, given

the aforementioned changes further hindering the XP progression tables of the last obtainable 5 levels, this already demanding and very uncommon mode of play is expected to be reserved only for the very few of the professional players who are simultaneously streaming their in-game activity as a source of income.

Constraining the competitive gameplay modes available for the majority of players effectively turns *Path of Exile* into a game of accumulation and disposition of resources. In theory, cosmetic rewards cannot be the subject of trade outside the direct purchase from GGG online store. Some of the MTXs serve as rewards in the short-term races, incentivizing players to take part in events which they realistically cannot hope to win – such was the case of Turmoil and Mayhem leagues, where each player reaching level 35 was guaranteed to receive a (randomized) cosmetic reward.

The RNG (random number generator) is one of the core gameplay mechanics that underpins all of the in-game data related to the statistics of weapons, layout of maps, and drop rates of particular in-game object. Interestingly, it was also introduced as a way to „gamble” on cosmetic rewards. The „mystery boxes” available for purchase in online store contain a random item from an aesthetically themed collection, and buying several of them does not prevent the rewards to double up.

According to Rancière, denying the right to politics equals denying the right of voice (speech). Theoretically, the categories of MTX competitions are designed to be inclusive: there is a separate category for avatars devoid of purchasable MTXs and can be obtained by just playing the game (called “Natural”). However, the characters dressed like that are unplayable – the MTX is attached to certain type of item, and its aesthetics properties reveal its practical use. MTXs in such cases can be compared to discursive smoke screens, hiding the uselessness of particular aesthetically appealing combinations. That is one of the factors which delimits microtransactions from other art assets present in the game space – they possess the power to effectively divide the functional from the aesthetic. The “skin transfer” mechanics, allowing players to attach one item’s visuals to another, partially alleviates this effect, but its usage comes with the additional costs of rendering the original “skin donor” unusable, thus making this strategy economically not viable.

On a particular level, the aesthetic strategies displayed by the *Path of Exile* players resonate with the notion of power gaming reframed from the perspective of sports discourse as an activity characterized by „being perpetually dedicated to the achievement of distinction” (Silverman and Simon 2009, p. 357). Most importantly, „it is not possible to be a power gamer on one’s own” (Ibidem). Albeit it is certainly possible to purchase and use aesthetic microtransactions while playing SSF mode (with all in-game player interaction besides chat messages excluded), the prime purpose of them is to show off. This goal is promoted by the Grinding Gear Games, which organize community-based competitions and events such as the “Well-dressed Exile Competition”⁸. Interestingly, the subsequent outcomes of them are often contested by the vocal subjects in the community on the basis of biased

approach to passing judgement by the gatekeepers – the ultimate GGG’s verdict raised some controversy over the unclear criteria on which the winners were selected. What is more, the critique comes from the accusations of *neglecting* the aesthetics for the sake of *in-game rarity* or market scarcity of particular MTXs used by the winning avatars. There are highly upvoted – which transfers to popularity ratings – comments on *Path of Exile*’s Reddit channels which suggest the self-awareness of the ultimate goal of such events:

“I feel like we need to remember that this is a PR/advertising exercise. It's not just GGG giving free MTX to the most deserving redditor, it's a way for them to showcase why spending money is worth it to the new players. So in that case, flashiness and variety start to become valuable, as well as the legitimately cool costumes.” (posted by EmployeeOfTheMoth⁹)

It can be argued that the powergaming discourse expands to the realm of aesthetics; power gamers are in this sense almost synonymic to „hardcore gamers”, as the visual display of taste remains directly connected with time- and monetary investment in the game. However, this category differs from its counterpart in MMOs.

„In general a player base composed only of power gamers would not be economically viable. The power gamer also does not fit well into the broader socio-economic matrix because the many hours spent playing are not spent working in any significant material capacity. Relatively speaking, power gamers produce nothing and consume nothing.” (Silverman & Simon 2009, p. 374).

Looking at this quote, one cannot help but to acknowledge the difference in gaming landscape of online RPG genres. In the case of *Path of Exile* power gamers proves that power gamers are in fact the foundation of game business model, crucial to sustain the financial demands of server maintenance and periodical (free) expansions with new content. This content – also meaningfully – is often concerned with end game only, thus targeted to the „hardcore” community. Chris Wilson, lead producer and developer of Grinding Gear Games, stated that the main company’s goal preventing the player retention is to constantly come up with new ways of engaging with the product. In the interview with a prominent *Path of Exile* streamer Zizaran, Wilson claimed that “you permanently damage the game by not having people engaging in your stuff”¹⁰. He also directly addressed the specific post-release cycle in which the game functions, also with regard to the financial *free-to-play* model in which *Path of Exile* operates:

“We need the releases because we need the influx of returning players. The company can make money and it's good, but not at the end of the league; when people are waiting for the next one, the company is not making money. And so, it's important that we have new exciting releases.”¹¹

This dynamic, succinctly summarized by the GGG head himself, omits what is perhaps self-evident given the *Path of Exile* financial model: the importance of sustaining the players’ interest in purchasing and obtaining MTXs, whether they are league-specific rewards awarded for playtime and achievements, or

purchasable “supporter packs” with a themed collection of MTX modifications. This is how the aesthetics define the social, economic, and eventful, heavily influencing both players’ gameplay strategies and developers’ schedule with regard to releasing new content and altering the already existing one.

TOOLS OF AGENCY

It is beneficial to juxtapose the theory with its target-audience interpretation of it, and for that purpose it may be revealing to quote the blog post by Kyle Chayka (2011), who interprets the definition of relational art: „the viewer experience of the constructed social environment”. That is also perhaps the most succinct description of aesthetic regime governing the discursive community of Path of Exile players. “Viewers” in this regard are not only players who can see each other in game, but also viewers of dedicated Path of Exile channels on popular streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv. Towards the end of each league cycle, the most prominent niche streamers (i.e. those primarily focusing on just one game, see Berglund et al, 2015) either temporarily switch their interest to different product, or engage in aesthetically-themed, semi-serious gameplay focused on characters generating unusual visual effects (see Figure 1.).

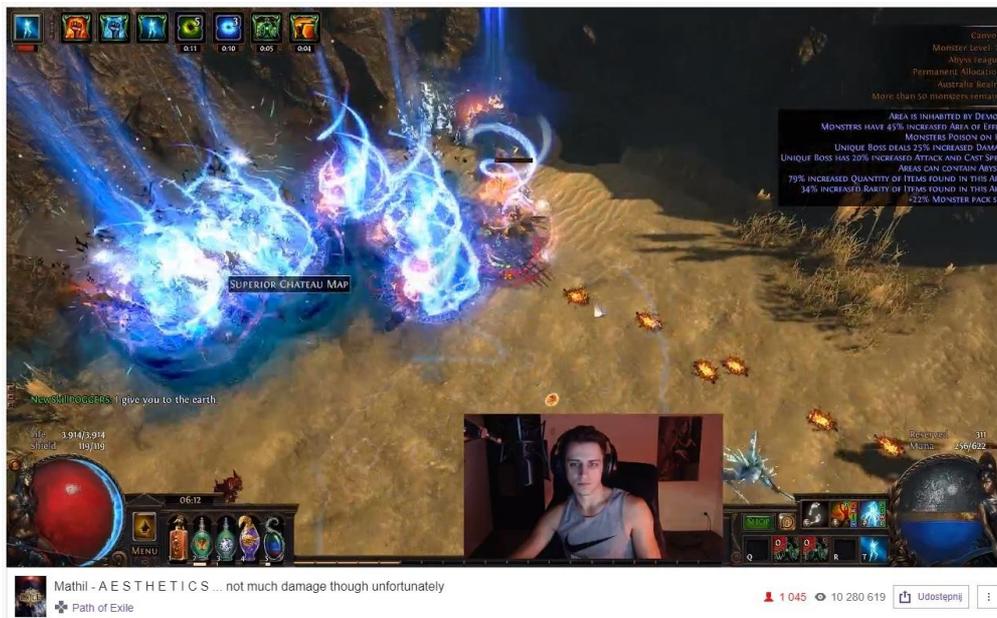


Figure 1: *Path of Exile* streamer Mathil during one of the sessions towards the end of *Abyss* league.

The theory or regime of art can be used as an analytical tool for video games not only through evoking Friedrich Schiller’s famous quote which attributes being a human to the very act of playing – which Rancière himself does (2004, p. 28) – but also through looking at particular aesthetically meaningful elements in game and placing them within the Rancière’s understanding of a political. For French philosopher, the political is strictly connected with the “distribution of the sensible”, which “defines the common of a community” (2004, p. 25). In other words, it can be compared to the situation where previously defined subject, in our case a gamer, despite the range of

possibilities attributed to her or him through the system of game rules, decides to participate in a different mode of expression. Killing monsters, collecting items and progressing through the subsequent areas of the game is in such occurrence interrupted by taking up on the new type of agency. Exploration of the aesthetic as finding an own voice fully comes to realization especially in cases of streamed play on platforms such as Twitch.tv, where the temporal constraints of play activity make the particular players' choices more meaningful. As an example, I would like to refer to the particular case of all-female live race organized in the series of popular community-based events, where female streamer known as DCLara obtained significant advantage over her competitors. At one time, she paused her progress, opened the MTX interface and spent some time adjusting the look of her in-game avatar (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: DCLara uses avatar-based MTXs during broadcasted race event.

Interestingly, this act is more than just a playful and provocative demonstration of counter-intuitive choices transgressing the conventionally established play frame (see Karhulahti 2016) of a race competition. Its meaning can be interpreted as an ironic meta commentary on prevalent sexist comments undermining the mechanical skills of female *Path of Exile* gamers, but I would argue that its significance exceeds also this particular reading. Referring back to Rancière and its definition of politics, it emerges

“when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society. This is summed up in the concept of the *demos*” (Rancière 2004, p. 51)

Temporal dynamics of DCLara’s choices to take potentially valuable time to select MTXs for her avatar during the race actively constitute the community *demos* by expressing her own aesthetics taste in arguably the most competitive mode of gameplay outside the GGG’s sanctioned League leaderboards. In that particular case, she is not only voicing her own uniqueness as a player – she at the same time reframes the game space and renegotiates what is socially permissible in this particular environment. The subversion, if there is any, lies precisely in exaggerating the importance of the (seemingly) superficial. Aesthetics MTXs are widely used by the most popular, “hardcore” streamers

who also achieve success partaking in various competitive modes of play, but their usage of them is conventional – it fits the standard mode of purely cosmetic avatar modifications, which possibly rise the entertainment value of their streamed broadcasts. In a way, DCLara unveils the unwritten codes regarding MTXs. It is only occasionally acceptable to show off the collection of MTXs or alternative skins during a Twitch.tv broadcast to validate the claim of being a professional player¹², but to deliberately emphasize their importance (as DCLara did) apparently goes against the unwritten “rules” of playing the game. While some works attributed to relational aesthetics would aim to “erode the distinction between the artist and the viewer” (Bishop, p. 56), the streamers work in an environment where the one exhibiting and performing is already a part of viewers-players community. Therefore, items and MTXs in the streamed play become a stage props for a creative show which has a potential of influencing the practices of a larger community of players, especially given the popularity of fan-based paratexts (Twitch.tv clips, memes and other artistic expressions) shared throughout the gamer-focused parts of various social media. This is also the political potential of aesthetics, which is very close to Rancière’s understanding of truly effective form of artistic intervention:

“aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms” (p. 63). The French philosopher further states that “suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resist signification”. (Rancière 2004, p. 63)

I would argue that this idea as described above is fulfilled by the actions similar to those displayed by DCLara during the aforementioned race event. The context of the message is clear to the target audience of Twitch.tv live stream or VOD recordings, and the act itself introduces a disturbance to the established aesthetics codes, while still remaining in the play frame (Karhulahti 2016) relevant to the designed form of interaction within the gameplay.

CONCLUSION

The approach presented in this study is a heuristic undertaking aimed at looking into the possible connections between the game’s aesthetics, its financial model and practices of play fostered by the community of players. The relational underpinnings are subsequently externally modelled by the design decisions and events approved by the developer, which gives structure to the players’ aesthetics experience, thus constituting a key factor in post-release cycle of the game. I argue that both Bourriaud’s and Rancière’s theories can be applied to analyze the practices of play in different forms and may yield meaningful results in terms of assessing the importance of broadcasted gameplay, as well as various paratextual practices happening outside the conventional practices of play. There is a tendency to tie cosmetic rewards to the community-building marketing strategies, such as organizing competitions for Twitch.tv viewers with the possibility to obtain rare in-game

MTX just by the fact of looking at someone who actively plays the game. The three areas discussed in this paper with regard to cosmetic microtransactions: social signification, award-based gameplay motivation and exerting community-based agency form a spectrum of specific post-release cycle for the successful online game with *free-to-play* model of consumption, which is inherently rooted in the work of aesthetics.

In conclusion, in the analyzed title, which is one of the most popular video games in its genre, the visuals and aesthetics become the key meaning-making tool. MTXs are used by designers to foster players' interest, but at the same time players express their opinions about the current state of the game by purchasing MTX-based "supporter packs", which effectively dictates the release cycles of expansions and patches. While designers prepare an aesthetics playground for players in hope that they would express their individual taste and inventiveness in a controlled environment, players use MTXs to further strengthen the ties between production, practices of play, and visuality. Thus, the model of relational aesthetics, in which the meaning is constructed through the interaction with self-organized spatiality, gradually gravitates towards the Rancière's regime of art, where the political potential is formed at the intersection of top-down supervision and individual egalitarianism.

The applicability of Rancière's theory possibly extends to the modern online video games which implement financial model similar to the one employed by *Path of Exile*. The strengths of the French theoretician's proposal lie in its successful attempt to go beyond the notion of postmodern "uncovering" or "deconstructing" the truth. Rancière claims that just by identifying some hidden meaning or social practice the interpreter merely establishes another hierarchy by evoking the power of knowledge. Thus, such critical work lacks the power to change the status quo. The proliferation of various internet platforms, such as Reddit or YouTube, which actively shape the gaming discourse and influence practices of play, force us to re-think which strategies of critique may or may not actually be acknowledged by the gaming community. Rancière's aesthetics takes command in the act of equating "the living and the acting" (Franczak 2017, p. 39). Playing with various forms of aesthetics becomes an increasingly important strategy both for developers and players, and the insights provided by Nicholas Bourriaud and Jacques Rancière can help formulate a critical vocabulary on the works of art in the context of video games.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For reference, see comment made by FightBear113 on official *Path of Exile* forums: “At what point are we allowed to say that: eyes, ok. character effect, ok. Helmet effect, worst thing I’ve ever seen” (<https://www.pathofexile.com/forum/view-thread/1929170/page/2>).

² For further reference, see https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/61jp71/fashion_is_an_illusion_exile/

³ <https://www.pathofexile.com/forum/view-thread/2036284>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZuAra9J-AM>

⁵ Examples available at https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/2hn421/hitler_has_entered_the_hideout/ and https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/5576g2/is_this_hideout_legal/ and https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/70mvn3/going_to_trade_something_and_came_into_this_nazi/

⁶ <https://www.pathofexile.com/forum/view-thread/1293321/page/3>

⁷ See interview with Chris Wilson, transcript available at <https://pastebin.com/iHZxyJw5> . Lines 218-224.

⁸ <https://www.pathofexile.com/forum/view-thread/1956131>

⁹

https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/6wvaun/winners_of_the_welldressed_exile_competition/

¹⁰ <https://pastebin.com/iHZxyJw5>

¹¹ <https://pastebin.com/iHZxyJw5> 213 line.

¹² For further reference, see an example of streamer RaizQT showing his collection of MTXs obtained in official race events: https://www.reddit.com/r/pathofexile/comments/83e0ub/raizqt_poppin_off_after_winning_1500_in_the_race/.