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Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines performances produced in two Performing Gameplay workshops in 2017 and 2019. These performances are labeled as intermedial, as they were produced by using video games alongside live performers. The aim is to explore the changes frame of performance causes in players and games, as well as in performances, performers, and spectators. The article focuses on two main themes: the transformative process from gameplay to performance, and vice versa; and the significance of non-human participants in this process.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on two workshops/courses held at the University of Konstanz, Germany, in Spring 2017 (from now on workshop K) and at Tampere University, Finland, in Spring 2019 (from now on workshop T).[1] Workshop K was a part of a Spring School course for Theoretical Media and Arts Studies. The course was an introductory course to game studies, and the participants were mostly literature and media studies students. Workshop T was a course titled *Performing Gameplay* for Internet and Game Studies students. I devised workshop T based on my experiences during workshop K. Both workshops were inspired by my ongoing practice-based PhD project in which I explore performance as a method in creating counterplay.[2]

During these two workshops, the students/performers produced 31 separate performances: in workshop K 10 and workshop T 21. As all performances were produced using physical space around the participants, and the medium of video games, they are categorized here as intermedial or live media performances. My hypothesis for this article is that performance[3] as a frame transforms gameplay into something different. What changes occur in the assemblages of players and games, and on the other hand, of performances and spectators?

For this article, I have picked two themes that were present in most of the performances. I do not focus on the content of the performances, but rather on the actions of the performers and the presence of the audience. This approach allows for a deeper analysis of structures and helps to create a more detailed account of what exactly does the frame of performance do in the context of gameplay.

The first theme is the transformation from gameplay and watching gameplay to performing and watching performances. The shift happens through the actions and attitudes of the participants, both performers, and spectators: it alters the way actions are perceived and performed. This question includes the notion of the audience. As gameplay transforms into performance, the previous divide between player and spectator changes as new agential positions, such as the pixel-spectator and the human-performer, emerge.

Second, I will discuss the role of the nonhumans, both as performers and as the audience. Framing these actions as performance allows the gaze to focus on previously overlooked agencies, which tend to be taken for granted in, for example, video game context. This approach also discusses the shift from the human body to the nonhuman body. To what extent the nonhumans, avatars, for example, are extensions of humans, and to what extend they might be having agency themselves? If we take the non-human participants, both performers and spectators seriously, alternative ways of thinking gameplay and our relationship to it are opened.

GAMEPLAY AS PERFORMANCE

INTERMEDIAL PERFORMANCE

According to performance scholar Erica Fischer-Lichte, performance reenchants the world by transforming its participants. This transformation is enabled by the nature of the performance event, which includes the bodies of both performers and spectators, emergent meanings, and performative generation of materiality (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Transformation is a liminal experience consisting of shifting boundaries, crumbling dichotomies, and breaking boundaries (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

As all the performances in workshop K and workshop T used video games in some manner, it is important to establish them as intermedial and/or live media performances. Intermedial performances are performances that use different media in their production, and during which those media are somehow redefined. Intermediality is about diversity rather than unity, it is collage or montage rather than a total work of art (Kattenbelt 2010: 35). Intermedial performance can be 'both physically based and on-screen; experiences may be both actual

1 Permission to discuss workshops K and T has been obtained from the students and/or the universities in question.

2 For definitions of counterplay see for example Nakamura & Wirman 2005, Apperley 2010, Huuhka 2019.

3 'Performance' in this article is used mainly to describe artistic performance and performance theory. Uses of 'performance' as technical performance or, for example, gamers efficiency during gameplay are defined in the text.

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and virtual; spaces may be both public and private; bodies may be both present and absent' (Nelson 2010: 17). Chiel Kattenbelt summarizes:

> My aim is to emphasise the performativity of intermediality by arguing that intermediality is very much about the staging (in the sense of conscious self-presentation to another) of media, for which theatre as a hypermedium provides pre-eminently a stage. (Kattenbelt 2010: 29)

The intermedial approach thus allows experiencing other media, such as video games in this article through the paradigm of theatre.

To deepen the concept of intermedial performance, I will add Grayson Cooke's idea of live media performance. Examples of this type of performance are VJing, live cinema, expanded cinema, and live coding, to name just a few (Cooke 2010; Scott 2015). Cooke has pointed out that live media performance is a difficult and under-examined genre, as it exists between the modes of production and performance, always in between (Cooke 2010: 194). According to Cooke, live media performances happen in 'real time', they are live and happen in the moment. Even though humans are involved in the process, they operate on a temporality that differs from the human intention. This means that there are always things that remain beyond human control. For example, in performances including generative algorithms, certain conditions are set, but the emergent performance has not been intended to play out exactly as it does. (Cooke 2010: 200–201) Live media performance is thus always unscripted and unpredictable.

I have chosen to include intermediality in the definition of the performances produced during workshop K and workshop T. As such, the definition already acknowledges the presence of other than human forces in the performance. The aim is thus not to focus on what games do to the concept of performance, but rather what the inclusion of performance does to the act of gameplay. When discussing video games, performance also has connotations of efficiency and technological capacity. Examples from the workshops show how the failure of technology or flawless technological performance capacity affected the performances. Failure in technological performance made room for different, improvised performance by the human performers as well as for the emerging non-human agencies.

Intermedial or live media performance emphasizes action: 'components of the event emerge and re-emerge in a range of "entanglements" that are always producing further "entanglements"'. (Scott 2015) The focus is on the process of production of the performance. The frame of performance and especially intermedial performance does indeed transform gameplay into something new. All the components are there already, but for example, the potentials of agency are activated by framing certain actions in different ways. For example, during gameplay, a stuck character could be seen as a nuisance, as something unwanted, but during a performance, the same occurrence could be seen as an event belonging to the whole.

WHAT IS GAMEPLAY?

As this article deals with the intertwinings of performance, theatre, and gameplay, it is necessary to establish what is included in the concept of gameplay here. Jesper Juul summarizes gameplay as a term to describe 'not how a game looks, but how it *plays*: how the player interacts with its rules and experiences the totality of challenges and choices that the game offers' (Juul 2014: 216). Gameplay is rooted in the programming and/or rules of digital or analog games, yet it can only be understood in relation to the player who experiences it through audiovisual, fictional, and other elements (Juul 2014: 216).

In this article, gameplay then means actions that are conducted while engaged with a video game. Not all the performances discussed are gameplay in the strict sense, but all are derived from gameplay. Juul emphasizes the unique nature of games in relation to other art forms, such as cinema or literature: they are 'unique in explicitly evaluating the performance of the audience, and in controlling the audience access to further content based on that evaluation' (Juul 2014: 216). While the difference between cinema and games is significant, performance and games – or gameplay – share more in common, at least if we consider the player not as a member of the audience, but rather as a performer. Both come to existence through actions.

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Gameplay happens with and in relation to games, yet there is no one definition of 'game' that would cover everything that is generally accepted and rejected as games (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera 2012: 5).[4] As this article does not strive to be rigid on what exactly counts as a game, it is enough to state, that a game is 'whatever is labelled a game in common parlance' (ibid.: 6). It is a vague definition, but it reflects the way games were chosen during workshop K and workshop T. The students were instructed to use a game, later a video game, and what they chose reflects their definitions and ideas of games.

GAMES AND PERFORMANCES

Performance and gameplay are both rooted in play[5] and are in many ways mixed. Many differences are on the hierarchical and institutional level and have little to do with actions themselves. If we look at an individual gameplay experience and compare it to an individual experience of a performer, descriptions tend to be quite far from each other. The situations described are intendedly simplified, rather stereotypic. The aim is to draw the end of imaginary dualism comprised of "gameplay" and "performance". On this scale, the stereotype of gameplay is on the other end and the stereotype of performance on the other. Gameplay, especially with video games, tends to be seen as solitary: it can be shared with friends, but it is also designed to be done alone (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera 2012: 22–29). Theatre or any kind of performance can be seen to be the opposite. For performance to be performance both the performer and the spectator are needed. Traditionally this is understood as the presence of at least two humans, and generally, the audience is significantly larger than the group of performers. Games often have some kind of result the player(s) is trying to achieve. This goal is often very concrete, achieved by completing certain actions in a certain order. There are, of course, numerous exceptions to this norm, as video games come in various forms. Performance, however, does not carry the same reputation of being goal-oriented, even though arguably people making performances do generally have goals: to perform, to express, to make money, to be seen.

Like performance, gameplay is seen here as an action that cannot be repeated as exactly the same. Games can be played again, and sometimes the player must repeat certain sequences to the brink of boredom, but the event is never exactly the same as it was before. Something always changes: in the player or in the game. Gameplay is never determined beforehand. The part of the player might be mapped out, but anything can happen: the player might sneeze, faint, get bored, play badly on purpose, or forget what to do – there are countless possibilities for distractions. The same goes for the nonhumans in the mix: the console might explode, the game freeze or get glitchy, or the power might go out. All these examples show how gameplay is live and tied to the moment. This liveness connects with the genre of live media performance: we could argue that all gameplay is emergent action happening within the programmed frame of the game in the interaction between the non-human game elements and the human(s) playing it. Some ways of playing video games and watching gameplay already extend to the realm of performance: for example, E-sports has established its place as a sport, which is watched by millions of people both online and on-location during game tournaments.[6]

Discussion of the necessity of liveness (Auslander 1999) as essential to performance has been present ever since virtual forms of performance gained space. Many performances use video, either live or pre-recorded. If we look at video games, they answer many of the demands of liveness. The environment reacts to the player in many ways, and the composition and rhythm of gameplay are not easily repeatable. Each time a player plays any video game is unique. In other words, the interaction of the player and the game is live.

PERFORMING GAMEPLAY WORKSHOPS

Workshop K was part of a spring school course for media studies at the University of Konstanz in spring 2017. This one-week-long course was divided between three teachers so that I had around eight hours for teaching. During these eight hours, we had time for an introductory

4 Jaakko Stenros has collected various definitions of games in his PhD thesis (2015).

5 See for example Carlson 1996; Schechner 1988; and Stenros 2015.

6 See for example Hamari & Sjöblom 2017; Rogers 2019.

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theory session, and two performance sessions. The theory session included different definitions of performance as a concept, followed by examples of different types of performance, ranging from traditional theatre to motion capture and performances set in game environments. After each example, we discussed what was noteworthy in that specific performance, and especially what or who was performing in each one. The aim was to widen the conceptions of performance and performer to include digital and virtual actions, spaces, and entities.

Workshop T was its own course, part of the curriculum of Internet and Game studies at Tampere University. This course took place in spring 2019 and was comprised of five four-hour sessions. The first session was an introductory one. During the introduction, I showed the students parts of three different adaptations of Shakespeare´s Hamlet: traditional theater, dance theater, and *Minecraft*/machinima version. The aim was to show a sort of fictional evolution of performing arts: from stage to the screen, and as in workshop K, to see virtual spaces and entities as potential parts of a performance. During the following four sessions, each group created a performance each.

When I was asked to teach in Konstanz, I was in the process of gathering material for my PhD thesis by experimenting with solitary performative actions in *Minecraft*. My experiences lead me to think that there would possibly be interesting outcomes if this mindset of gameplay as performance would be introduced to a slightly bigger group of gamers. The aim was to find whether the changes I had observed while playing alone would be applicable in a group context.

When designing workshop K, I had a vision of disturbance: how to somehow disturb the unwritten norms of gameplay situations by framing them with the concept of performance. During workshop K, the directions were quite vague when it came to the assignments. For the first session, I merely advised the students to 'create a performance' using a video game. I did not want to give detailed instructions, as I wanted to allow the students to define performance themselves, without pushing my own impressions more than was presented during the introduction. For the second session, I asked them to 'create a performance' and to 'think outside the box'. The first performances were all focused on what happened on the screen, and some were following the narratives already present in the games. Asking the students to 'think outside box' seemed to guide them to extend the intended performance beyond the console in most cases.

After workshop K, I felt there was something interesting in the performances the students had created. Mixing two concepts, video games and performance, seemed to be, for many, weird and somewhat strange. The question of why this would be worth doing again was the first I had to answer. Indeed, why to do performances using video games in this particular setting? Based on the experiences in workshop K, it was clear to me that there was something in the concept of performance that pushed people to think differently. The materiality of the game became more concrete through a shift in perspective. Students had to consider things they would have not normally noticed – and the same applied to the audience as well. The frame of performance elevated the activity to something similar, yet profoundly different. Compared to my solo experiments the performances made during workshop K were a lot livelier. By this, I mean that the students clearly addressed others in the group with their performances. In other words, understandability and the entertainment value of the performances were considered.

When designing workshop T, I already had an idea of what might happen. In workshop K, I had observed that certain aspects, such as the non-human performers and the creative use of avatars as performing objects were present in many of the performances. In addition to this, I had noticed that the social aspect of the performance situation was important for the performers. Based on these notions the assignments for workshop T were more specific: each had a specific theme that resonated with my previous observations. This did not however mean that the performances created would have been predictable or that the guidelines determined what was going to be created. The aim was to guide students towards different ways to interact with games without restricting their creativity too much.

The themes for the performances in workshop T were re-imagination or adaptation of a classic; non-anthropomorphic non-human performers; pixels as the target audience; and breaking the rules. Each of these themes was designed to address a specific problem or notion. *An adaptation of a classic* was meant to ease the pressure of coming up with an initial idea. When the students had a plot in mind, the first performance was easier to produce. In the second

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performance, the aim was to *acknowledge the nonhuman performers* and to move the gaze away from game characters to other entities present during the gameplay moment. The third performance aimed to take the nonhuman theme further by focusing on *pixels as the audience*. By directing the actions towards the gaze of pixels, the performance altered the position of the human audience as well as the way the human performers positioned themselves. The last assignment asked to *break rules, both written and unwritten, theatre and video games, physical and virtual*. This task was designed to twist expectations of how a performance should be constructed, and what would be normally included in gameplay or a performance that deals with gameplay. This last task was also designed to provoke counterplay through performance.

Overall, workshop T had similar results as workshop K in terms of how the performances addressed nonhuman agency, audience, and games in general. The main difference was that during workshop T the students had more time to work on their concepts, performances, and thinking. The overall timespan for workshop K was three days, while for workshop T it was six weeks. During workshop K the students did not need to report their experiences in writing, while in workshop T a learning diary or an essay was part of the course.

Next, I will go through some prominent themes that arose in the workshops. Each will be accompanied by examples, which illuminate the issue in question. All the selected themes were, however, present in most of the 31 performances.

TRANSFORMING GAMEPLAY INTO PERFORMANCE

As mentioned earlier, this article is built on the idea that performance works as a transformative force in relation to gameplay. There are several reasons for this. Performance as a frame messes with the usual norms and rules of the gameplay situation. While performance does not interfere with the actual agreed or coded rules of the game, it replaces the rules of the social situation. Watching gameplay is different from watching something framed as performance, as the frame of performance or theatre has different connotations, starting from the divide to popular and high culture, commercial product, and art experience. These divides are in many ways artificial but say a lot about the stereotypical ways of classifying things. The question here is how does gameplay become performance in this specific context? First, I will look at the actual practices that transform the action from gameplay to performance. Second, I will analyze the changes on a deeper level: what happens to the game, as it is temporarily stripped of its original purpose.

As the focus of both workshops K and T was to make performances with video games, it is essential first to distinguish them as activities. I have already conceptualized performance and defined gameplay, and the next step is to point out the obvious similarities and differences. First, both are activities done – at least for the most part – for leisure and pleasure. Both include consuming, either of the commercial or free products or free or commercial experiences.

Performance is separated from the everyday, from the non-performance by conscious choices, by framing the situation as performance. This happens through the actions of both the performers and the spectators. They engage together in the normative ritual of theatrical performance: the position of the audience, silence, direction of gaze, and applause in the end. To create a performance an intention is needed, initially either from the side of the performer or from the side of the audience. The gaze must be directed to the performance, either by signals given by the performer or by the interest of the audience. This definition includes also spectating gameplay as gameplay. The concept of performance means similarly the display of skills, keeping up standards, and patterned or restored behavior (Carlson 1996). As all of these are present in gameplay as well, distinguishing 'regular' gameplay from gameplay as performance is rather subtle. The students in both workshops read performance in relation to theatre, and this undernote affected the productions. To become performers in this context, the students had to follow assignment guidelines. The motivation thus came from outside, but the students needed to transform it into action.

The transformation from gameplay to performance happened through various methods. In both workshops K and T, during the first performances, various groups used spoken guidance as the transition from game to performance. The performers would first explain the narrative of the performance and then play the game. This narrative was often directly the account of the game

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events. In some cases, the performers started playing, and then explained the narrative as they were playing. In some, this happened through a distanced narrator; in others, the performers had scripted descriptive lines for the characters. There was thus a distinctive tendency to make sure that the audience understood exactly what the performers were aiming for.

When preparing the performances, the performers built upon pre-existing schemes of what a performance should entail. These preconceptions were probably partly based on the examples I had given, but mostly on their own experiences and ideas of performances as a phenomenon. These ideas and notions changed during the sessions. In many groups, this meant that the importance of, for example, spoken narratives diminished. In later performances, the need for explanations grew smaller, and most of the performances were framed by connotations of how performance should start and end: waiting for the audience to calm down; the performers entering the stage as a signal of the starting performance; ending in silence; and/or bowing or saying thank you to mark the end. Even when ignoring the content, the events were recognizable as performances of some sort. Structure brings safety, it gives an inkling of what should be expected.

Most of the performances had an added element to the gameplay. By this, I mean that watching gameplay was rarely the only way to experience the performance. Human actions, music, and other elements from outside the game were added to elevate gameplay to performance. This already reduces the importance of the video game as a game and transforms it to something else, a prop, a performer, a stage set. In some performances, the chosen video games were played as intended, but several of the performances did not focus on the core structures, such as the stories or mechanics of the game.

HUMANS AND NON-HUMANS: DEFINING AGENCY BOTH ON AND OFF STAGE

When performing with and for video games, or any kind of machinic device, the question of the non-human arises. We can argue that the video game is a performer as well. The way of looking at the nonhuman performership depends on the role of the nonhuman in the performance. The frame of anthropomorphism is always present when discussing non-human agency. When we open the discussion about whether nonhumans can perform, we define performance solely through human experience. This is of course expected and, in some ways, unavoidable, as our experiences are limited to our human bodies. However, we can make openings and allow for alternative perspectives that consider the possibility of different experiences.

Regardless of the level of agency we give the nonhumans, in these performances their presence is undeniable. Video games simply do not exist without nonhuman input. As this nonhuman influence is usually interactive, we tend to take its influence, if not agency, into account. Labeling video game performance as live media performance allows us to better take the nonhuman agencies into consideration. Jo Scott, drawing from Karen Barad, sees agency in live media performance as emergent, not pre-existing. In other words, agency is created in the intra-actions that take place in the specific performance. Scott writes: 'each moment of improvised generation involves a specific "being" and "doing" in order to build the audio-visual or intermedial space and that moment is also a point of agential enactment.' (Scott 2015).

Jo Scott also calls the intermedial performer a creative technician, which also underlines the nature of the performance. Even though the performances made in the workshops differ from Scott's events, the basics of working between two worlds, the actual and virtual, apply. (Scott 2015) The sense of danger from technology is also something that defines these performances.

Scott writes that the body of the performer in live media performances is in a state of 'dynamic reconfiguring', being both a 'performing technician' and 'activating performer'. (Scott 2015) The relation to virtual and/or machine performers is different from the relationship to other human performers. In the workshops of Konstanz and Tampere, non-humans had multiple positions. In some performances, the nonhumans were used as props, and the focus was directed to the human performers. When the nonhuman, even when moved or operated by humans, is in the center of the stage, it is much easier to identify the performance. If the nonhuman in question is, for example, the game device, it is often left out of the reach of the spotlight. It is often perceived as something that enables the performance – for example, lights make performers visible and microphones make them heard – rather than as something that performs.

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All performances using technology have a risk of technological failures or errors, most common problems have to do with lights or sounds. In intermedial or live media performances, failing technology has a more devastating effect, as it is often the center of the performance. Failure of technology is part of the genre, but if not anticipated by the performers and/or the audience, it can cause awkward moments.

I have previously argued that errors, glitches, and bugs in video games – and other virtual environments – are demonstrations of nonhuman agency (Huuhka 2018). Small moments of the game being broken, out of control, small moments of nonhuman control. The same can be applied in performances that feature machinic nonhumans, on stage or backstage. Glitches, bugs, and refusal of cooperation divert the gaze to the nonhuman, making it visible. I would argue that the frame of performance transforms also the nature of the glitch. If during gameplay it would be seen as a distraction, as something that breaks the illusion of smoothness, during a performance a glitch can, at least for the spectator, be an interesting part of the performance. It is the element of surprise, the unexpected. We often talk about machines as repetitive and unerring, but for example, in the performances made during the course machines and virtual entities were the ones to err and fail. In other words, the human was the stable force driving the performance. This, of course, applies to only certain types of performances. If the part of the machine or pixel would be preprogrammed and then merely played on screen, there would not be a possibility for the types of errors described here. However, this would not be live and, as such, it would be seen more as a set or prop than as a nonhuman performer. Liveness is at the core of this notion. The events that happen on the stage happen in cooperation with humans and nonhumans, and due to this, the possibility of things going wrong is essential.

In the workshops bugs, glitches and failures did happen. They forced both the audience and the performers to think differently. For example, I took the failures as performative actions by the non-humans, in other words, they became parts of the performance. The human performers were of course somewhat discouraged by these disturbances, as there was the pressure of the performance going as planned. As none of the participants were experienced performers, let alone live media performers, the pre-assumptions of how performances should be were quite rigid. In addition, the pressure of succeeding in making a good performance was also present.

Example – Broken Controller

During the second performance session of workshop K, one of the groups produced a performance, in which a PS4 controller was in charge and the human performers were spectators inside the performance. The game was *Broforce*. One of the human performers tied the controller stick into one position. This made the game character move only forward, and all other possible movements were thus removed. The set of this performance was a movie theatre, in which the human performers watched the gameplay itself. We, the audience, watched both the screen and the audience inside the performance.

In *Broforce*, the player(s) travel from left to right in a two-dimensional world fighting enemies that emerge from the right side of the screen. In this particular performance, the character was not able to fight, so at the beginning of the performance, the character was killed repeatedly in a few seconds. During the performance, the character however got stuck, and for the last five minutes of the performance, we watched the audience on stage watching a game character running towards a wall. This was not intended, and the performers were unsure how to end the performance, as they had not considered this possibility. The performance ended when I, worried about the time constraints of the workshop, asked whether this was the end. The performers replied with a yes, the audience then applauded, and the performance space was dissolved.

This performance demonstrated two different ways to deal with non-human agency. The performers had given the lead to the controller, even if the conditions were dictated by humans. They positioned themselves as spectators to the gameplay. The agency of the controller was tied to its materiality. By manipulating the controller with a rubber band, it was given a possibility to perform on its own. However, this agency was abducted by the game itself. It improvised, and changed the intended narrative of the performance, which confused the human performers.

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Example – Sharing Identities with Avatars

In the second performance session of workshop K, one group used an MMORPG *Path of Exile* to create a performance called *Life*. During the previous session, the same group had used the same game to tell a narrated story of explorers on the quest to find a treasure while fighting monsters – something that resonated with the given narrative of the game. For the second performance, they created something completely different. The students set up a table in the middle of the classroom. They then positioned five avatars, equipped with armor and weapons, on a virtual beach in *Path of Exile*. They stood on the waterline, as waves hit their feet. The human performers then played a chill-out, a beach-vibe song from someone's smartphone. Five performers sat down around the table; some were leaning back in a relaxed manner. Some were wearing sunglasses. One of the performers offered beers for the others. They then opened them, cheered, and continued to drink them, while the music was playing.

The performers were in two bodies at the same time – the virtual and physical human bodies demonstrated a different aspect of the same situation. This was a good example of the performance happening in two dimensions, or two locations at the same time. What made this performance especially interesting was how it transformed not only the gameplay but also the whole environment. Adding a forbidden element, such as alcohol, to the classroom was an act of resistance. It did not merely disturb the norms of gameplay, but also the norms of what is allowed in the academic context.

PERFORMING FOR PIXELS

In workshop T, the fourth assignment was to produce a performance for pixels. I wanted to shift the attention from recognizably shaped game objects, such as characters, to more abstract entities. In previous assignments, pixels had been established as performers, but now the task was to imagine the kind of performance a cluster of pixels would enjoy. As the audience was virtual, I asked the students to take the materiality of the game/console as a part of the performance, as well as to introduce an element from the environment to the performance.

My general observation is that these performances broke away from both the norms of gameplay and 'traditional' theater the most. My interpretation is that the focus on the nonhuman as a spectator somehow encouraged the performers to disobey norms, thus allowed for more varied takes on performance and gameplay. As the students in the group were not theatre students, they perhaps had more conventional ideas of how a performance should be, for example, in relation to the audience. As the audience was already unreachable and unconventional, the performance seen by the human audience was altered.

When watching the performances, it became clear that defining what would be interesting for the pixels was a difficult task. Students had different visions on what would be enjoyable, and in most performances, they had given a lot of thought to the mental landscape of pixels. Many of these ideas were derived from the way pixels look. Many of the performances created used physical props. While discussing their performances, the students argued that pixels would enjoy seeing something else than pixels or virtual entities. In other words, the purpose of the performance was to be different from their normal life, to separate the everyday from something special. Another point was that as pixels constantly perform for us, we should in turn perform for them. The pixels came accessible through anthropomorphism, by giving them desires relatable to human ones. In many performances, it was assumed pixels had the same senses as humans.

The human performers also were more in the spotlight in these performances: during the previous exercises, the humans had been in a way beside the performance. They had a quality of invisible puppeteers in them: the humans were present, but existing towards the game and the screen. This time the relationship was directed more to us humans, and I think this happened because of the imagined pixel audience. The performers had to take that audience into account, and as a byproduct, this acknowledgement spread to include the human audience.

Example – Secluded Entertainment

In one of the performances, the performers built a wall between the human audience and themselves, creating a sort of separate space in which the performance happened. This wall consisted of colorful stool blocks. Above the stools was netting made from plastic yarn. On the other side of the wall were two screens positioned across from each other. The pixel audience

was located on one screen, and on another screen, one of the human players played an 8-bit game, which was left unrecognized – after all, it was meant to be seen and experienced only by the pixel audience. Music from another 8-bit game was played. In this performance, the idea was that pixels enjoy watching themselves, or others that resemble them, in a secluded environment. We were told after the performance that the other screen facing away from the human audience was the pixel audience and the performance happened on the other screen, and the wall was built to exclude us, the human audience from that event. This worked, as the human audience was not able to see much from behind the wall. I saw a glimpse of the game screen; the pixel audience was hidden from view.

This performance worked against conventions of performing and spectating, as it shut out us, human spectators completely. This positioning answered the assignment, however broke against the unwritten rules of that specific classroom/performance situation: the spectators should see what the performers were doing. The pixel audience was given priority, in other words, they were taken seriously.

CONCLUSIONS

All the themes discussed in this essay deal with actions that happen at the border, in liminal space. The border between physical and virtual; man and machine; gameplay and performance. Performance as a tool and concept could transgress these borders, and thus uncover structures and entities otherwise left in the dark. These transformative moments do not alter the virtual or physical reality of a certain game; however, they do open moments of doing otherwise. They offer a space for the non-humans to gain agency, and for the humans to experience virtual worlds as something different. The frame of performance offers a new viewpoint into the material realities of video games, allowing us to take games and their components seriously as agents.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Marleena Huuhka holds an MA in Theatre and Drama Research. She is currently working as a doctoral researcher in the Centre for Practice as Research in Theatre, Tampere University, Finland. Her PhD thesis examines video games as places of performative resistance and searches for new counterplay practices.

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