"PLAY IS PULLING THE GODDAMN TRIGGER": DIGITAL GAME VIDEO CONTENT PRODUCERS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF GAMESPACE

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Introduction

Within digital game studies, theorizing the overlap between gamespace and the physical world is often an area of contention. While many scholars draw strict boundaries between the virtual world of the game and activities outside of it, others have attempted to explore ways that game activities expand beyond these strict boundaries, using concepts like the magic circle (Huizinga, 1950; Caillois, 1961; Castranova, 2005). Yet these theories of gamespace do not take into account the expansive influence or reach of games through media convergence. What happens when game characters appear in gamer-produced mashups, or when gamers record their own gameplay and share it with others on YouTube?

This paper presents results of a qualitative study that investigates the experiences and motivations of individuals who create remix videos from digital game characters, content, and situations. In exploring the ways that these game creators represent play and manipulate the materiality of the games themselves, this project argues for an expansive definition of gamespace. Games are playful and built for interaction; this interaction, this paper argues, supports a participatory mindset, encouraging gamers to continue to play with the digital game content. This work theorizes gamespace for the age of media convergence, considering how gamespace expands beyond the game console and the screen through participatory media.

Play

Huizinga (1955) defines "play" as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (p. 28). Huizinga's definition also includes activities that fall outside traditional rule-bound games, which this study takes

up in complicating how time and place is bounded through the materiality of new media and the practices of participatory culture.

Materiality

Digital materiality is central to expanding notions of gamespace in participatory culture. Leonardi (2010) argues for a definition of materiality as "the practical instantiation of theoretical ideas" that has significance in a particular system and context. Apperley and Jayemane (2012) describe the "materialist turn" in game studies that examines the materiality of games not just for their code, but sees them as artifacts that have some effect on the world. In remixing these game artifacts into fan-made content, these creators intervene in the materiality of the games themselves.

Gamespace

The term "virtual world" places the boundaries of gamespace specifically within a virtual space (Taylor, 2003; Rowlands, 2012). Taylor (2003) emphasizes the experience of immersion and notes a multitude of gamespaces, stating, "the player *in play* is present in more than one spatial domain." The gamer has a teleprescence within the space of the game; the player is within the character and simultaneously outside of him or her while still remaining present in the physical world. In playing with game elements in these digital remix videos, these video creators expand the boundaries of gamespace.

Methodology

In this study, the author interviewed seven digital content creators who share their videos on YouTube: Andrew Bridgeman from Dorkly, Miles Luna from Rooster Teeth, Aniol Florensa & Oriol Esteve from Marca Blanca, Dane Boedigheimer of DaneBoe Productions, Laura Kerger, also known as Artist Gamer Gal and formerly of Machinima, and Ed Stoel and Marco de Ruiter of Herdstudio. These creators were selected from among the most popular, active, and subjectively interesting digital content creators on YouTube. Their videos remix characters and situations from digital games, and their videos range from hundreds to millions of views. Dorkly, a division of College Humor, for example, creates short, humorous videos that place classic digital game characters in different settings, such as a sitcom featuring *Mortal Kombat* characters. Rooster Teeth produces the popular *Red v. Blue* series, which uses recordings of gameplay from the *Halo* series to create a narrative. Each creator participated in a 30-minute interview about the process of and motivation for creating these digital videos.

Results

Each of these content creators reported that play was a central element in creating these remix videos. Miles Luna of Rooster Teeth reported that the situations in their videos always come from gameplay, and they even use gameplay as an introduction into their production process:

> Whenever we go into a map and we have to set up a scene, before we get everybody in place to shoot, a lot of times as soon as we spawn, we try to kill each other a few times, and then we go, ok, that's enough, let's get to work. That

part is play. Because when we're recording, you can't pull the trigger, and in the first-person shooter, that is play.

While many of the creators described the labor of the production of these videos, this production always involved an element of play, and creating these remix videos extended the experience of gameplay to these videos.

Interestingly, though, Luna does not consider this process wholly as play; the behavior of the production team belies the social nature of games. Poole (2004) describes digital games as "allow[ing] for, are often specifically built for, a form of social play activity" (p. 166). The social nature of the activity, then, even when in a work rather than a social environment, encourages that social behavior. Tavinor (2009) notes the ways in which digital games encourage certain types of behavior. Though players can play against the rules of the game, so to speak, the game encourages certain types of behavior, especially first-person shooter games: "Armed with a large gun in a constrained fictional environment populated by other players, it is almost inevitable that players of *Halo* will spend their time shooting each other" (p. 103). In many ways, then, Luna and his coworkers were compelled to shoot each other because they occupied the space of the game, even when they were in a work environment.

As Luna detailed, whenever they first begin shooting, the desire to play is overwhelming, so much so that they delay the labor portion of the exercise to feed this overwhelming desire for play. The social environment here is essential for this experience, though. I would suggest that if Luna or any other member of the Red vs Blue created these projects as solo endeavors or independently from other team members, that the element of play would be lessened if not absent for the creators. This situation is true not only because of the social nature of digital games and first-person shooter games, but because the act of playing the game took them within the magic circle, which Jones and Thiruvathakal (2012) describe as "an alternative reality" (p. 93) created when they play the game. Games, they argue, create a "metaphoric space," (p. 94) existing both within the physical world of work, in this particular case, but also within the world of the game.

The success of these digital remix videos also requires manipulating the materiality of these digital games. The videos need to draw from characteristic elements of the game itself in order for the audience to recognize the game. It is also in manipulating the game's materiality that these video remixes create humor. For creator Dane Boedigheimer, creating digital remix videos is also a way to intervene in the games beyond the extent possible in playing the games themselves:

Part of it was just loving those games, especially the retro games I grew up playing like PacMan and Donkey Kong and stuff like that, and the one thing I always remember about those games is they were so impossibly hard. . . So I think to some degree it was a little bit of revenge on those games, you know, being able to manipulate it and go back and kind of play things in your hands a little bit rather than getting killed after three levels.

Boedigheimer stated that part of the motivation of these videos is to intervene in the original game, to play with its materiality. In creating these digital remix videos, he is continuing to play the digital games themselves, just under his own terms and outside of

the rule-bound structure of the game itself. Using the artifacts of the digital game, Boedigheimer is able to create new gameplay situations.

Many of the digital video creators discuss the ways that digital games have become an important element of popular culture that extends beyond the games themselves. Milner (2012) argued that the game itself is only a small part of the larger gamespace. Andrew Bridgeman drew on this notion by discussing the ways that digital games have inspired content beyond the game itself, extending stories, characters, and content.

> They are a much bigger medium than I think they really get credit for a lot of the time. And their ability to connect with you and because they're an interactive medium . . . they're interactive in multiple ways. And just look at mod communities today. And fan art communities. They have inspired a lot of people to do creative things. I think that's a really cool thing.

Through remix video and venues for sharing this video like YouTube, these gamers and video creators use remix videos to extend the characters, game environments, and play beyond the digital game itself. These activities, I argue, expand gamespace to another environment.

Bridgman and many of the other creators interviewed for this study connected his own work to the ways that fans expand a franchise beyond the original commercial product. Murphy called himself a "content creator," and like Bruns' (2008) "produser," he saw himself as expanding the culture around digital games. This process, I contend, extends the actual space of the game from the traditional game boundaries to the participatory video created from it.

References

The experiences of these participatory video producers extend the boundaries of and our conceptions of gamespace to these participatory media. These creators demonstrate through their experiences how their production practices expand gamespace. As Luna, Bridgman, and Boedigheimer stated, play is a central focus of their own video creation process. Their videos represent not only familiar characters of digital games, they also represent and recreate the activity of play. As Luna noted, play is a large part of their creative process; the subject matter of their videos is inspired by play, but play is also central to the creation process itself, as the creators play the game, and even shoot each other, as they make their videos. Dane Boedigheimer saw play within his creative process as well, albeit from a different perspective. Making videos based on retro games, like *Paperboy*, allowed Boedigheimer to rewrite the game and play it the way he would want to.

These discussions suggest that making these kinds of participatory videos based on gaming culture is another form of alternative play. As Ashton and Newman (2012) argue about gaming walk throughs, I argue that remix videos about digital game actions and situations are another way to play the games on which they are based. Ashton and Newman describe the ways that gamer-written walkthroughs promote exploration and experimentation rather than holding up an official way to play the game. In much the same way, these remix videos promote interaction and experimentation as these creators continue playing the game in their own way. These gamers create digital

videos to manipulate game situations in new ways unanticipated by the games' creators. This process that expands the boundaries of gamespace creates an important cultural space in which these video producers comment on and play with the materiality of these digital games.

These individuals are not only gamers, but they are also participating in cultural production. Like other participatory media creators, these video creators take a media text they are fans of and create a new media product from it. They not only play games, but they create new media products from them. These participatory remix videos represent an alternative form of gameplay that expands our conception of gamespace and demonstrates the important role of participatory culture in responding to digital games

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