

Espen Aarseth
Center for Computer Games Research,
Department of Digital Design, IT University of Copenhagen
Aarseth@itu.dk

Spec Ops: The line between player and spectator in ludic entertainment

Abstract

This paper will discuss the phenomenon of mediated game spectatorship, from the early games to today's e-sport championships and online communities (youtube, twitch.tv, etc), and develop a descriptive model of the different modes of *ludic spectatorship*, that is, the possibility space of different spectator positions and modes afforded by games and gameplay.

Introduction

The main research question is, what can an open-ended exploration of ludo-spectatorship tell us about the oft-assumed line between participants and spectators?

This line, imagined or not, reifies the ideological demarcation of power and agency; between those who act and those who (merely) observe. It has been challenged before, see e.g. Skjervheim (1996). But with games, this demarcation has always been suspect, from the gladiatorial slaves locked in semi-deadly combat observed by their wealthy masters (Grant 1971), to Gadamer's (1989) critique of ludic subjectivity: the game plays its players and constitutes the only real subject of gameplay. While a few gladiators rose to fame and wealth based on their ludic success (just as today's boxers,

MMA fighters and e-sport champions) the large majority suffered and eventually died for their (masters') sport.

Accounts of agency in games often fail to observe the ludic framing that invalidates the spectator/participant dichotomy. In these accounts (e.g. Wardrip-Fruin et al 2009), agency is operationalized and reduced to game operation; the agent becomes a manipulator of game mechanics, not a free person in charge of their own destiny. But when we try to disentangle the relations of power, agency and freedom in games, we cannot afford to reduce the question to a player playing, operating the game machine. In a cultural, social context, the game exists on many levels of performance, and the 'playbour' (Kucklich 2005) performed does not equal agency, merely engagement (Calleja 2011). Engagement, and even more so, its companion emotion pleasure, however, are not restricted to gameplaying, but are also central traits of spectatorship.

Thus, spectatorship becomes something very different from merely an optional aspect of gaming, the notion that games can have spectating but they do not need or depend on it. On the contrary, all games must be spectated, if only by their (would-be) players, and the more spectators a given game has, the more (socially) valuable it becomes. One can also ask the more fundamental question: is experiencing others play, and playing with others, the only path to play itself? Can play develop in isolation, or does it progenitively depend on observation? Single-play is nothing new, but neither was it the first form of play, as Juul (2002) has pointed out.

This also has methodological implications; Aarseth's (2003) insistence on "playing research" and the playing researcher is challenged by the obviously valuable insights that spectating a difficult or inaccessible game can afford. We learn play from

seeing others play, and then and only then, do we ourselves play (and not merely fumble). For the time-pressed game researcher, watching a difficult game streamed or on Youtube not only empowers research, but also makes the game accessible in a much more economical way. In fact, we get two benefits: insights into the game, and insights into another player's playing. Most games rely on observation prior to successful play: Professional chess players and football coaches as a rule study the previous matches of their opponents to gain a sense of technique, style and strategy, thereby gaining an advantage which can be critical.

This paper will argue that "spectatorship" is central to gameplay, simply because the player must observe in order to play. But before we continue, let's deal with the unfortunate ableism implied in the term 'spectating'; do we really want to exclude blind people from our discussions? Or what are we talking about when we are talking about spectating?

The origin of 'spectate' clearly implies seeing, and not only metaphorically. *Observe* ("attend to"), on the other hand, does not imply functioning eyesight, so perhaps we should switch to that? If we do, however, we lose the fine dichotomy of "spectating play", where one senses a tension and a difference between the roles of participant and audience. All players must, by definition, observe play (unless of course, the player's task is to be sleeping or unconscious), so "observing play" does not bring about the right denotations. Instead, let us acknowledge the inherent ableism, and proceed using the term "spectate" in a metaphorical sense, understood as experiencing play from a critical position. (An alternative would have been "from an outside position", but that implies that play has an outside, which is far from obvious, especially given the ephemeral ontology of play.)

The player is the first ‘spectator’, and cannot escape spectatorship. Screen based games, whether diegetic or ‘abstract’ (or better than ‘abstract’, nonrepresentational and concrete), provide a necessary, visual feedback loop of information that the player must observe in order to play. There is, paradoxically, no real need to transform and adapt the player-directed visual feed in order to make it accessible to an audience, unlike, in many cases, board games. The player’s actions are reflected and auto-digested, and this mirroring and visual consumption is the basis for videoludicity and for the benefit of players, not just a side product conducive to audience-directed entertainment.

In mapping the possibility space of ludo-spectating (by cataloging contrasting spectating modes across a wide array of games), the paper will point to spectatorship’s fundamental role in play itself. *Veni, vidi, ludi.*

The history of mediated spectatorship

Since the author of this paper belong to those who don’t believe that the digital/analog distinction in game studies does us any analytical favors (GRA, anyone?), and that terms and concepts like ‘videogames’ have little purpose or use besides as political demarcations, it is not important here to limit the discussion to recent ludic practices, quite the contrary. All theory should attempt to generalize as much as possible (but not more than possible), and to start a historical account at any point after it could have been started is only a limitation made for practical reasons. Thus, we start at the notion of mediated games; that is, mediated game sessions, and not mediated game equipment (such as printed game boards and mass-produced tokens). A mediated game session would occur for the first time in history whenever a game session was depicted, told or reenacted for the first time. Accounts from ancient literature, and

depictions before that, from cave paintings, ostraca, etc, will have to stand as generic examples of the first mediated games. Cicero, during his brief stay in Cilicia in 51 B.C., complained to his friend Caelius that his letters (news bulletins) from Rome contained too much useless information such as accounts of the Roman gladiator games (Stephens 1988: 62). As media history progresses, letters, official reports, pamphlets, printed books, newspapers and eventually, telegraph, radio, and TV broadcasts, carry game accounts to a larger and larger audience. Quite early, these media themselves provide opportunities as media for play as well as for representations of play: Chess by mail, where two players exchange their moves by post cards, must have been an early example. Other mediated examples include lotteries and racing game results transmitted directly to the players (gamblers) as well as to the gambling houses and bookies. And of course, one of the first uses of the Baltimore-Washington telegraph line in the 1840s was to play chess (Standage 1998:132). Ludic spectatorship got a big boost through the new synchronous, electronic media of radio and TV. Quizz shows were among the earliest types of radio broadcast programs, from the first commercial radio days of the 1920s (Sterling 2004: 1912).

Going through all the developments in new media, and especially the internet, is beyond the capacity of this paper. What they, and especially the internet, has changed for spectatorship, however, is to allow, within the same medium, the simultaneous combination of several modes, whereby one observes oneself playing as one plays. More on this in the next section.

Play and selfie-play/ludo-poïesis: Play as irony

Computer games, including text games like the old adventures, offer the (seeing) player a perspective on play which includes the player's own representation. Not all games do this, of course, but all offer a view of the results of the players' efforts. Because of this reflexivity, all play becomes ironic; what we observe when we play is an us that is a not-us, a critically distant representation of ourselves that tells us something has happened to the us that is not us: "You have died". The same can be said of all non-ephemeral, mediated communication. Computer-mediated play is a kind of writing (autography), where, as with all writing, we get to see our text/us from the outside. And we also get to construct the not-us. A smiley can be used when we are not actually smiling; and often is used to defuse a critical message; we mean it when we call someone out, but the smiley is there to soften the blow, or to blur and mask our true feeling. In gameplay, this becomes the default mode: We play, and play is irony; or, as Sutton-Smith (1997) and before him, Bateson (1955) would have it, ambiguous. It is us as not-us. What the textual non-ephemerality of the computer allows us, is to watch ourselves play, to record it, and to study it, not in hindsight, but as a normal part of the play itself. A LARP can be recorded (but only partly) and we can look at that partial recording later if we wish, but the FPS kill-cam footage, our dead avatar lying on the virtual ground, the chat dialogue of the MUD or the MMO, all these not-uses linger on the screen as we continue to play: This presence-which-contains-the-past is the selfie mode of textual play which even in a philological sense crosses the line between immediate, selfless play-being and ironic, spectating ludo-poïesis. The line, then, can be observed to run between the state of selfless/-losing play that Gadamer refers to when he discusses the almost Nietzschean abyss of the player subject possessed by the game ("the subject of the *game* is not the player but

the *game itself*”) and the self-observing, ironic player, who is constantly reminded of her own existence in the game. While game interfaces partly determine where this line is drawn, it is also determined by the players’ state of mind, which may be self-aware, or in what is sometimes crudely referred to as flow (Csíkszentmihályi 1996). When I play, I may or may not see my ludic representation, but it is still there, whether I look past it or not.

A taxonomy of ludo-spectatorship

To identify the parameters of spectating play, it would be prudent to start with the widest possible categories: time, space and action. Note that we are not classifying games themselves, but rather the different modes through which they can be spectated. The goal here is to identify the possibility landscape of potential spectation, by studying existing game situations and drawing up a map that includes the white spaces between them. In terms of space, one can distinguish between local spectation and non-local (e.g. tele-spectation). The same goes for time: synchronic or retrospective/diachronic. Action can be direct, affective, selective, or indirect. Direct action means one can influence the game state as a player; affective means that players can be affected by one’s communication (e.g. cheering, booing); selective – that by selecting a mediated option (switching a TV channel, viewing a youtube clip)), the event is made more popular/visited, and indirect means that a secondary event (e.g. a retelling or edited account) is made more popular/visited. Alternative terms to action here could be interactivity, agency, or even causality, but action seems the more fundamental term.

In terms of a football game, say Man. United vs Chelsea, Sunday 16th 2017 at 4:00 PM, there are of course a number of spectating modes available: directly, from

the field, affectively, from the stand, selectively, mediated through a medium of choice, or indirectly, e.g. by narration. Some modes seem to depend on each other; we may say that they group naturally: affective spectator groups with local and synchronic; but it is possible to affect a game retrospectively, or from afar (by telepresence of some kind), and from the future (by retroactive rules, e.g. the outcome of doping tests).

Time Space	Synchronous		Retrospective	
	Local	Direct In-field player, or board-game participant	Affective Communicating observer (shouting at players)	Direct Judge tallying score, deciding outcome
Selective Having choice of perspective		Indirect Being informed by other (an event speaker)	Selective Kill-cam- or goal-line watcher	Indirect Guide retelling match, textual walkthrough
Nonlocal	Direct Twitch plays Pokemon	Affective Commenting in live chat	Direct Doping-contr. disqualify player	Affective Posting comment on stored recording
	Selective Choosing between live channels	Indirect Listening to/reading live comments online/radio	Selective Watching recording	Indirect Learning of outcome from witness

Fig. 1: A taxonomy of spectating modes in three dimensions – space, time and action

This multidimensional taxonomy nevertheless presents us with a hierarchy of affective spectatorship, from the local/synchronized/direct, via the nonlocal/synchronic/affective, to the non-local/diachronic/affective, to the non-local/diachronic/selective and finally non-local/diachronic/indirect. All combinations are possible, though some are less common, such as the local/diachronic/indirect (a guide in a sports arena, telling an audience of a famous match that took place there a long time ago).

Conclusion

Are space, time and action enough, or are we missing vital potential parameters?

Doubtlessly we are. Formalizations (bless them) are always a reduction of reality; this is the nature of theories, concepts and models. But perhaps sixteen different forms of

spectation, ranged across a spectrum of agencies, is enough to destabilize, perhaps even deconstruct, the pervasive but false player-spectator dichotomy?

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank The European Research Council (ERC), whose support of the project MSG – Making Sense of Games has made this paper possible.

References

- Aarseth, Espen (2003). "Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis." In *Proceedings of the digital arts and culture conference*.
- Bateson, Gregory. "A theory of play and fantasy." *Psychiatric research reports* (1955).
- Csíkzentmihályi, Mihály (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, New York: Harper Perennial.
- Calleja, Gordon (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. ([1960] 1989). *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Grant, Michael (1971). *Gladiators: The Bloody Truth*. London: Penguin History.
- Juul, Jesper (2002). "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." In CGDC Conf. proceedings.
- Kücklich, Julian (2005). "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal* 5.
- Skjervheim, Hans (1996). "Participant and spectator." *Selected essays. In honour of Hans Skjervheim's 70th birthday*, pp.127-141.
- Standage, T. (1998). *The Victorian Internet: The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's on-line pioneers*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Stephens, Mitchell, (1988). *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite*. New York: Viking (1988).
- Sterling, C. H. (Ed.). (2004). *Encyclopedia of Radio*. Routledge.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian (1997). *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press.

Wardrip-Fruin, N., Mateas, M., Dow, S. and Sali, S., (2009). "Agency reconsidered."
Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory.
Proceedings of DiGRA 2009.