Playing is Performing – Video Games as Performance

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Introduction

Performing arts and playing video games are both forms of human creativity. They are also a form leisure, a way of expression and part of economic structures. They offer a position for both the performer and the audience. Further, both playing and performing are processes, which do not in most cases produce any material products. An artistic performance ends, and player reaches an end in the game, but the enjoyment depends on the process. Both activities are about the journey, not the destination per se.

Performing arts and games in general build upon play as a human activity (Huizinga 1980; Schechner 1988; Caillois 2001). Despite the common heritage, video games and performing arts have radically different positions or roles in the mediatized society of today. Performing arts – for example theatre, opera or ballet – still enjoy the place as "high culture", whereas video games are seen as popular culture, more as products than as works of art[1]. Video games have grown to be one the defining phenomena of the 21st century. Along with the digitalization of the society, video games grow in importance: they are part of education, leisure, sports, health and work (WePC 2019; Techopedia 2019).

The aim of this article is to establish ways gameplay can be seen as performance. I will briefly examine the concept of performance by going through writings of performance scholars, including Marvin Carlson (2004), Richard Schechner (1988), and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008). The aim is to pinpoint the defining characteristics of performance, especially on relation to video games as an activity. Next, I will present a definition of video games as performance, by matching the characteristics of performance with the action of gameplay. I will offer five different perspectives on video games as performance and as part of performance. This divide is not definite, but shows us different sides of both human-game-interaction and performance as a medium. These perspectives

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[1] There is a lot of discussion on whether or not video games can be seen as art, and if they are art, are they art through interpretation or intention. The definition of art is always changing, and video games as a relatively new form are reforming that definition. For a summary see Deardorff 2015.

range from the usage of video games as a prop or additional media resource in conventional theatre to gameplay as performative activity. The aim is to extend the concept of gameplay through performance theory. The frame of performance is a playful attitude, which shifts the gaze from stories to actions by emphasizing performance's processual nature.

The categories suggested in this article are to be taken with a playful mindset. The main question is how to understand playing video games as performance and creative, artistic practice? In his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) has described the shift in performance from "traditional" theatre towards postdramatic theatre as "more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information" (Lehmann 2006, p. 85). Lehmann's work is based on theatre, but these qualities resonate also with video games and especially with gameplay. Performance research has not yet been thoroughly explored as a method for analyzing video games[2]. By expanding the notion of what counts as performance this article does its part in filling the gap in research.

Video games can be played in a variety of ways. In this article I focus on playing as leisure activity. This will rule out educational games and E-Sports. The main reason is that these types of games or gameplay situations already have another strong reference point – learning, competition or even work. They have a purpose other than gameplay, and as such they are ruled out of the zone of artistic performance in this article.

What is performance?

Performance is a contested concept, which varies in meaning depending on the field of use. Performance studies sees performance as something that exceeds the field of theatre or other performing arts: in a nutshell performance research is research of actions.

According to theatre scholar Marvin Carlson, performance has three definitions: *the display of skills, patterned behavior,* and *keeping up the standard* (Carlson 1996, pp. 2-5). *Display of skills* means literally consciously showing off someone's – or something's – skills. This can mean anything from actor to opera singer, from an athlete to a gamer, from a barista to a lion tamer. *Patterned behavior*

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[2] Works combining performance theory and video games do exist, however they are still rare. Few examples: performance theory has been suggested as a structural tool for analyzing video games (Fernández-Vara 2009); avatars have been discussed as puppets (Westecott 2009) ; gameplay events have been experienced as site-specific performance (Westerside & Holopainen 2019); and roleplaying games have been discussed as performative (Hoover, Simkins, Deterding, Meldman & Brown 2018; Montola 2009; Stenros 2010).

means behavior that is distanced from the person doing it. Taking on a role of another person – acting – is a prime example of this. According to Carlson patterned behavior is what distinguishes performance from "real life" (1996, p. 4). Performance scholar Richard Schechner talks about restored behavior. He includes all human behavior that separates the activity from the person doing it under this category. This means theatre, rituals, shamanism or adapting any kind of role (Schechner 1981, p. 2).[3] The frame of performance transforms the activity: on stage something is performed, while outside of the stage it is merely done (Carlson 1996, p. 4). Performance is by nature something that can be repeated, yet it is never exactly the same performance it was before. *Keeping up the standard* refers to the quality of something. We talk about sexual performance, linguistic performance, academic performance, engine performance, software performance, company performance – the list goes on. Here the audience judges the quality of the performance based on generalized level of success. (Carlson 1996, p. 4)

To dig a little deeper into the concept of performance we turn to Richard Schechner. Schechner lists five nominators that are common to forms of performance: play, games, sports, theatre and ritual. These are "1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4 rules" and 5) special place to perform these activities in. (Schechner 1988, p.6) I will go through these five nominators later.

According to performance scholar Erica Fischer-Lichte, the defining characteristic of performance is transformativity. Fischer-Lichte writes:

> By transforming its participants, performance achieves the reenchantment of the world. The nature of performance as event – articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emergence of meaning – enables such transformation. Theatre and performance art since the 1960s have repeatedly demonstrated a peculiar interest in playing with and reflecting on these constitutive conditions of performance and its inter-related processes of transformation. In consequence, we have begun to understand these conditions as inherent to all performance, regardless of its genre or historical placement. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p.181)

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[3] As we all have different social roles and we are, at least to some extent, aware of them, all human activity can be considered performative. See e.g. Goffman 1990.

This transformation happens through the liminal experience made possible by all types of performance. The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators builds performance: breaking boundaries, shifting roles, and crumbling dichotomies enable liminal experiences. This can mean the transformation of people's place in the society, the position of the spectator switching to the one of the actor, things turning to something else as first perceived. The performative turn – the dissolution of boundaries – in arts is used to describe the shift in the paradigm of how art is received and produced. According to Fischer-Lichte there is no longer an independent work of art, but rather "an event that involves everybody". (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 18) Fischer-Lichte sees performance as a possibility to see the world as reenchanted:

> …encourages them to enter into a new relationship with themselves and the world. This relationship is not determined by an "either/or" situation but by an "as well as." The reenchantment of the world is inclusive rather than exclusive; it asks everyone to act in life as in performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 207)

As we can see performance is a concept that covers all human – possibly also non-human[4] – activity. It is noteworthy that though all of the scholars discussed come from the field of theatre or performance research, the definitions of the concept extend beyond the field of theatre or even art as a general category. Schechner, Carlson and Fischer-Lichte see performance as something that is present in all aspects of life and in the workings of our societies. Shannon Jackson (2004) summarizes the concept – and the discussion around it as follows:

> In sum, performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real. (Jackson 2004, p. 15)

Common factors of videogames and performing arts

This article pinpoints ways video games can be seen in relation to performing arts, performance art, and in some cases, to theatre especially. Next, I will go though some structural similarities, which tie together all activities categorized as performance. These include the five nominators from Schechner, as well other relevant qualities. Performance theory in general does include play and games as human activities, and video games are no exception, even though they are not directly mentioned.

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[4] See for example Kirkkopelto (2017).

Temporality

One of the defining qualities of performance has been the notion of time. Every single artistic performance happens only once in a specific place at a specific time. Performance is ongoing: it is processual by nature. Because it only exists in the present moment, it rarely produces any material products: it is a process and not a thing. If a performance has more than one show, every single one is different to all the others. Performance cannot be repeated. It can be done again, but every single repetition is a new action.[5] (Phelan 1993; Fischer-Lichte 2008)

Gameplay operates essentially the same way. All actions of the (human) player are done in a specific physical space during a specific moment in time. Even when the player is forced to repeat a sequence of gameplay, – a hard boss fight, an impossible jump – the actions are always different from the previous time. The player changes – position, feelings, cells, fluids, stomach content, and expressions – as does the space and the relation between the game and the player. Video games are generally purchasable or downloadable products, but gameplay is a process. Gameplay does leave marks of what has happened: scores, save files and memories, but gameplay itself cannot be stored. We can of course save screenshots and video material of gameplay, but it is not gameplay that is saved, it is the mere documentation of it. Gameplay happens always in the moment.

According to Richard Schechner there are three major varieties of performance time. *Event time* is the time during which the event should or must be completed, regardless of the time span. This means for example the duration of a sports match, a rain dance, or the length of a rehearsed performance. *Set time* means the predefined time that an event should last, whether or not the activity has been completed. It includes football, basketball and all the games in which the aim is to score points in restricted time. Last, *symbolic time,* describes the difference between the actual time span and

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[5] Shannon Jackson summarizes the problematics of repeated or patterned behavior and the non-repeatable nature of performance: "To many scholars, performance's repeatability has been fundamental to its theorizing, whether couched in Richard Schechner's restoration of behavior, derived from Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody, or echoed in Judith Butler's adaptation of Derridean citationality. While such scholars have been quick to add that repetition occasionally entails variation and difference, their point of entry differs markedly from that of Peggy Phelan who argues for performance as fundamentally non-repeatable, as a reiteration whose chief feature is its non-reproducibility. Competing associations revolve around other performance registers, further confounding the quest for theoretical purity. For some philosophers, performance is an intentional realm of purposive action; for others, it is an unintentional realm of spontaneous or habitual enactment. Some theorists, spurred by recent cultural theory, link performance to innovative realms of creation and resistance; others, reproducing new versions of older Platonic condemnations, link performance to derivative realms of conformity and tertiary imitation. Finally, the occupants of many theatre departments use a language of the actual, the real, and the authentic to distinguish their practices of artistic production from a presumably "less real" practice of scholarly research. (Jackson 2004, p. 14)

representational time span. For example, an event that would take hours in real life can be over in seconds on stage or in a game. This is common in theatre, rituals, and play and games. (Schechner 1988, pp. 6-8) Video games use all of the above time modes: event time can refer to the time the player needs to be able to complete objectives of the game (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 2); set time to any game where the player has to do something in a tight time frame; and symbolic time usually passes in games that have some sort of narrative and a world, for example in *Minecraft* the day and night pass with their own specific pace.

Things

Performance can be defined through a special relation to objects. According to Schechner, objects in everyday life gain their value through practicality (tools), rareness and beauty (gold, art), transactional power (physical money), or age. In performance context, objects which may hold no significant value become important. For example, balls or other sport equipment are indispensable during sports events, props and costumes create symbolic realities in theatre and child's play. (Schechner 1988, p. 9) In video game context, virtual objects gain their value from the effect they have in the game. For example, health potions help the player survive, or the player might need some specific items to reach places (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 2). To summarize in Schechner's words: "The 'otherworldliness' of play, sports, games, theater, and ritual is enhanced by the extreme disparity between the value of the objects outside the activity when compared to their value as foci of the activity" (Schechner 1988, p. 9).

Rules

Rules define the activity: football played in school yard is the same game as the one played in the *Champions League*. What changes is the scale and the quality. If the rules change, they change usually globally, but adjustments can be made in the local level. Mischief, bribes and similar forms of outside influence may occur, but they are recognized as something that is against what should be. Schechner writes: "the rules are designed not only to tell the players how to play but to *defend the activity against encroachment from the outside.*" (1988, p. 11) What applies to sports and games[6] applies to all performance activities: traditions shape rituals, and conventions define theater, dance and music. Rules set these activities apart from the daily life, rules create the magic circle in each of these cases. (Schechner 1988, pp. 10-11)

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[6] For a thorough summary on definitions of rules in relation to games see Montola (2009).

Nonproductivity

Third common factor mentioned by Schechner is "the separation of performance activities from productive work" (1988, p. 9). This notion – previously attached to play by Johan Huizinga (1980) and Roger Caillois (2001) – is for Schechner the most unifying and interesting one. As game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara points out, this is debatable (cf. 2009, pp. 2-3). Professionals earn money in theatre, sports or e-sports, or any other form of performance. In certain videogames players develop characters and sell them to other players, thus making real profit from virtual world[7]. One might however argue that these profits are made from arrangements and structures surrounding the actual performance. The profit comes, for example in the case of theatre, from the people who want see it. In other words, the profit is tied to the spectatorship. The same goes for sports: not everyone who plays football gets paid, neither does everyone who is brilliant in *Counter-Strike* (2000-). The money is tied to sponsors, game companies and venues, in short is tied to audience and customers. Non-productivity means that performance does not produce anything of material value outside its own context. The performance itself remains unproductive.

Space

Performance space or the magic circle[8] describes the shared space in which the rules of performance are valid. The space might be designed for the purpose, like a temple, stadium or theatre, (Schechner 1988, p. 11) or it might emerge from the performance, like in the case of street theatre or game of football in the park. (Fernández-Vara 2009, p. 3) In video games this space extends from the virtual to the physical, as the players' actions in the virtual world are created through the physical bodies and devices. According to Fernández-Vara this double position both in and out makes the players both performers and spectators. (2009, p. 3) The performance space of videogames expands even more, if we look at online games. The in-space is shared by the players in the same game or same area of the game, and outside spaces might be scattered around the globe. What connects them is the game, the process, the performance.

Liveness

Theatre has been seen as the art of presence, bodily co-presence that creates the autopoietic feedback loop, as Fischer-Lichte describes (2008, pp. 38-39). This quality has been considered as the base of the experience in for example, theater: the thing happens right there and right now. However theatre

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[7] *World of Warcraft* (2004) is a great example of this. See Itstillworks (2017)
[8] See Montola (2009) for a thorough summary.

has utilized technology from the very start of its history, and has adapted new technologies readily (Salter 2010, pp. xxi-xxiii). "Technology is integral to the history of performance. […] Performance is integral to the history of technology" as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distils (1999). From deus ex machina to moving stage sets, from microphones to live streamed videos. Often the use of new technology has sparked discussion of realness or authenticity of the performance. Similar discussions center now around live and prerecorded video as a medium of traditional theatrical performance. Any performance – concert, competition, ritual – can be streamed live across the globe, and it can viewed both in the exact moment and as a recording. Fischer-Lichte notes that

> A new dichotomy has emerged between live performance constituted by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and spectators and the autopoietic feedback loop and mediatized performances which sever the co-existence of production and reception. Mediatized performance invalidates the feedback loop. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 68)

However, in the case of gameplay the feedback loop is not severed. The interaction between the game and the player are live, they happen exactly then, as the computer runs the program based on the players. Also in online games other human players are present in the same virtual space exactly at the same moment, even if their bodies are located somewhere else. Video game characters can be categorized as "virtual puppets", in contrast to the "tangible puppets" used in traditional puppetry (Kaplin 1995, pp. 37-39). Puppetry has been defined by the real-time manipulation of the puppet, which has then excluded for example animated characters in movies from the realm of puppetry (Tillis 1999, pp. 183-184). However, in the event of gameplay the player is manipulating the avatar, the virtual puppet in real-time. The avatar probably has pre-animated gestures and actions, but the player is responsible for making them visible during gameplay.

The more complex, interactive and real-time technology becomes, the more difficult it is to distinguish live from non-live. Philip Auslander (2006 p. 527) has said that for example early music recordings did not spark conversation on liveness, as they were easily distinguishable as exactly what they were: recordings. Digital and virtual technologies open the discussion on what is and should be considered live. Auslander uses chatterbots as an example of a virtual entities that create content in interaction with humans. Codes operating those bots are made by humans, but Auslander looks at the phenomena from performance perspective: chatterbots (and other interactive entities) shift the discussion to the ontology of the performer. Even though chatterbots are technological entities, they produce rather than reproduce. (Auslander 2006, pp. 529-531) This applies to video games as well:

in many games the other characters and even the game itself reacts to actions of the player. Auslander concludes:

> The ability to present performances that can be watched as they occur, or, to switch to a technological vocabulary, to perform in real time – the heart of the concept of liveness – is an ability shared by human beings and chatterbots. The appearance of the Internet chatterbot therefore does not occasion a redefinition of liveness or a realignment of the conceptual relationship between live and recorded performances, as did the earlier development of radio. But what the chatterbot does occasion is considerably more profound: it undermines the idea that live performance is a specifically human activity; it subverts the centrality of the live, organic presence of human beings to the experience of live performance; and it casts into doubt the existential significance attributed to live performance. (Auslander 2006, p. 531)

Audience

As discussed before, the presence of the human body has been seen as an integral part of performance. This usually has meant both the body of the performer and that of the audience member/audience. The same divide is compatible with the gameplay event, although the materiality of the bodies might be a little different.

A situation where one or more humans play a game and one or more watch would be analogous with the traditional theatre situation. The situation changes somewhat, if the player is alone in the room. They might be still watched by other human players, for example in many online games. The other might be engaged in the activity with "our" player, or they might be just witnessing the events as a passive audience. In any case they share the virtual space. The performance is thus mediated, but nonetheless live. This can be compared to a theatrical performance in which the actors perform via video from a different space.

What if our player plays a single person game alone? The audience is first person audience. First person audience is something that happens when the performer and the audience are the same person. In these cases the performance is finished in the mind of the spectator, and others participating can only access their own side of the performance. This type of performance is in the center of live action

role playing, LARPing. In LARPs the players usually play on two stages, that of their mind and that which is visible to other players as well. (Stenros 2010, pp. 300-303)

The audience can also be non-human. Gameplay experience is always connected to various other entities other than the human alone. These entities include pixels, machinery, code, and everything else that is connected to the event of gameplay. (Huuhka 2019, p.221)

Agency

What happens when someone plays video games? That someone is engaged in a physical, bodily activity. Regardless of the mode of interacting with the interface – hands, feet, full body, gaze, or voice – the player is using their body (Parisi 2010, p. 116). The player is interacting with some sort of virtual environment. That environment may or may not strive to resemble something familiar to the player; important about that environment is that is exits for the player. My main focus in this article is on the performative agency of the player(s). Performative agency is not limited to the human player. As we approach the gameplay situation as a performance, we can see that a player does not act alone. Their actions are affected by others, both human and non-humans, entangled in the system in question. (Huuhka 2019, pp. 221-223; Giddins 2005, p. 119)

Video Games as Performance – Five Approaches

I have divided video games as performance into five different categories. Each category has a slightly different approach to both performance and to video games. All gameplay is performance, but all performance is not homogenous. We understand performance in theatre and performance in a social situation as different types of performance. The same applies to the categories presented here. I have chosen categories that can be understood as artistic practices. Further, all of them are deliberate: they have been planned and organized as performances. In addition I have focused mostly on gameplay as performance, though there are exceptions. I have left out some cases of gameplay as performance. As explained previously, the three definitions of performance – display of skills, keeping up the standard and patterned behavior – can be used to describe very varied aspects of human activity. For example, striving to beat a high score in an arcade game is performance in all the mentioned ways, yet it is not necessarily meant as an artistic performance.

Examples in this article are all from situations, where the actions are framed as performance by the performers themselves. This outline not only allows the analysis of said performances, but also offers

a short guidebook for the performers themselves.   How to perform with games and by gaming/playing?

First Approach – Video Games as an Aesthetic Resource

This category is firmly based on the "conventional" theatre and performing arts. By this, I mean that video games are used as an added medium, or an aesthetic resource. A video of a game might be used to mark a specific era, or video game imagery might represent some atmospheric notes. For example, in a theatrical performance, a video of a first person shooter might mark violent behavior, or some fast-paced game might be used to represent the problematics of being human in postmodern capitalism.

Theatre and technology have always been intertwined: in metaphors, in stage design, in the orderings and instructions of the stage, actors and the whole event (Salter 2010, p. xxi). Against this shared history, video games are just another technological invention entangled in the assemblage of theatre and performance. This category has little to do with playing or gaming, but it does reflect the importance of games in our society. Video games have large audiences, and as mass produced commodities and cultural objects they portray shared history. In short, video games can be used as any other cultural reference, either as a representation of something, marker of something, or just for pure aesthetic pleasure.

To summarize: gameplay described here is utilized as a prop, as a mark of games in general. In this sense gameplay here is not performative, but rather supporting the performance.

Second Approach – Video Games as a structural category

Video games – or games in general – as a structural idea is something that is fairly common in what is called "immersive theatre". Rose Biggin (2017) describes immersive theatre as follows:

> I draw from philosophical aesthetics, cognitive science and computer games
> to define immersive *experience* as a graded, fleeting, intense and necessarily
> temporary state defined by an awareness of its temporal and spatial
> boundaries. Immersive theatre, then, is a genre of theatrical work in which
> certain audience configurations might be expected, but in which immersive
> experience itself can only be allowed for, not guaranteed. (Biggin 2017, p. 1)

The audience usually are actors in situations where they make choices, and the choices directly affect the narrative of the performance. Artist Group Blast Theory's *Black Antler* (2016) positioned the spectator as an undercover agent, whose mission was to infiltrate a right wing extremist group. In the performance the spectator was pushed into uncomfortable and threatening situations, even if the whole situation was fiction. (Blast Theory 2019) Immersive theatre can be used as a form of activism (Dinesh 2019), or as a way having fun, like in Joseph O'Farrell's *10 Minute Dance Parties* (JOFmakesART). Immersive theatre has a lot in common with live action role playing games or LARPs[9], where the player plays their character within the guidelines provided by the game's writers.

Performances in this category are something that might be described as game-like, immersive or interactive. They give the spectator a possibility to influence, or at least feel they can influence the events. In other words, they offer the possibility of agency. They also offer the possibility to be immersed, to experience the fictional reality around differently from traditional theatre.

Third Approach – Performances Staged Inside Video Games

Performances staged inside video games are usually something that player communities´ stage, or sometimes what the game company wants to offer for loyal gamers. For example, EDM artist Marshmello has held concerts in *Fortnite* (2017). Both the artist and the audience are present through their avatars, and communicate by dancing[10].

The rules of the game also usually change in these situations. For example, it would not be acceptable to attack or kill other characters during this event. In the case of *Fortnite*, the venue only allows players to carry out certain moves or emotes, mainly ones that are suitable for dancing. The players do not thus have the possibility to, for example, use weapons on others. However, the rules also change to comply with the situation. I believe most players attending such an event follow generic rules of how to behave in a concert, as can be observed from recordings of those concerts. The rules of behavior are of course subjected to the logic of the virtual world: the audience can, for example, jump higher than the stage. The event has its own performance space, its own magic circle.

Here is a great example of the transformative power of performance. An arena of competition and virtual violence becomes an arena of celebration and peaceful co-existence. The main reason for this

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[9] See for example Stenros 2010; Montola 2010.
[10] Marshmello has published this concert in their YouTube (2019) account:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBsCzN-jfvA

is of course the presence of virtual Marshmello, but moreover it is the framing of the situation as that of artistic performance conceptually, but most likely by limiting the available movements and items.

Years ago, I used to play *Lord of the Rings Online* aka LOTRO (2007), in which people regularly organized concerts in various locations around Middle Earth. Players would post notices on virtual notice boards, inviting people to come to a certain location at a certain time. There they would play their instruments, and other players would watch. Here the frame of performance transforms the space from space of travel to space of staying. The game consists of quests related to the J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) storyline and its imagined expansions, and usually people just scurry around completing quests and generally minding their own business. A staged, preannounced performance legitimizes the different interactions and modes of sharing space with others. This also sometimes happened in spaces such as taverns, where people would impromptu perform for other present players. I have not played other similar MMORPGs[11], but I assume similar practices are found in other games as well.

In a nutshell: the frame of performance transforms the space and the players in it. Players create new rules, which may differ from the rules of the game world, like in the case of Marshmello by bringing something of the real world to the virtual world. Or, like in the case of LOTRO, the performance deepens the structure of the world by bringing events that might be real. In any case, different framing alters behavior and the performance time.

Fourth Approach – Performances Made with Video Games

To this category, I put performances that are made using video games as medium and also as performers. This category partly overlaps with the prior, but it has its own specific details and characteristics. First, the game is not a prop, but rather in the center of the performance. Second, the performances don't take place inside the fictional or virtual world, as in the previous category. Rather, they take place on the border of virtual and actual. Third, the human performers are acting alongside the machinic and virtual performers. Fourth, the games are often used in ways that have little do to with traditional gameplay.

I have organized workshops, where the students have been asked to create performances using video games. The main goal of the workshops has been to look at video games as medium that can be used

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[11] massive multiplayer online role playing game

in different ways, but also as fellow performers. A performance of this category might have some qualities from all the previous ones, or none. A game may be used to tell a story that is unrelated to the game itself. I have for example seen *The Lord of the Rings* performed by using football game *FIFA 2018*.[12] The performers played with one team as the Fellowship of the Ring, and the other as the forces of Sauron. The ball was the ring, and the story was told by narrating the gameplay following loosely the plot of the book. The game here is not a prop, but more of an extension of the performance space. As Fernández-Vara mentions, the space of performance extends from the virtual to the physical world (2009, p. 3).

If we think about the qualities of performance, Fischer-Lichte's transformativity is key. Changing the context from gameplay to artistic performance changes not only the position of the player but also that of the audience. The audience directs their gaze to things that are usually of no interest to someone watching someone else play. The player is transformed into a performer, the meanings attached to the things in the game change to something different.

Fifth Approach – Gameplay as performance

The last category is gameplay as performance. This approach includes multiple meanings, as does the concept, but I am most interested in gameplay as an artistic process.

First, we must forget the narratives and the meanings: we must explore gameplay as postdramatic (cf. Lehmann 2006). Video games are works of art in their own right, and as such they can be enjoyed by looking and exploring, or whatever the designers have had in mind. However, to be able to grasp the artistic performance in gameplay, we should leave the art of the game in the background, to treat it as a setting for the action. The attention should be directed to the player, and the interaction between the player, the game, and the game device.

When we think about for example the environment of a certain video game, the first intuition would be to see it as some sort of a representation of a world or a fictional world. For example, in a first person shooter game the representation could be of a city block on a war zone or abandoned industrial complex. When shifting the focus beyond representation to actual presence, we might notice that the pixels do not really represent anything. They exist as themselves, and as assemblages arranged in

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[12] This happened in Performing Gameplay course in Tampere University. This course was a part of my ongoing PhD research project.

certain ways. By this, I mean that a tree in a virtual world does not merely represent a tree, but rather it is a virtual tree in a virtual world.

Representation has the quality of making absent the thing it wants to make visible. A virtual tree, when seen as representation, cries out the absence of a tree. It is nothing more than a sign for something that is not reachable. However if accepted for what it is, a virtual tree, a cluster of pixels, it becomes present. (States 1985, pp. 8-12) This question of presence affects the whole experience of playing. Gameplay is situation in which the player or players create action together with the game devices and virtual environments (Giddins 2005; **Waldrich 2020, p. 183).** The process is deeply rooted in the body of the player (Parisi 2010, p 112).

Usually video games are seen as a representation of "the real world": the avatars and the things are meant to portray things and characters of physical form. However, the reality of a fictional world is more – or probably actually less – complicated. Fictional world is what it is – a fictional, virtual world and not a representation of anything. For example, the world of *Minecraft* (2009) is not a representation of an actual, physical Earth. It is a fictional, virtual world made of pixelated blocks. It has its own laws of gravity and physics, its own time system and own aesthetic.

What a player does is use the device – controller, keyboard, mobile – to operate in the virtual world. The device transfers the movements into movements in a different dimension. The movements of the player are not representational. They are what they are: moving buttons with fingers. The movement is then transferred to the game, but as something else: the movement in the game is not a mirror image of the movement of the player. Take the example of *Minecraft*: the player presses a certain button and the avatar moves its pixelated limb holding a pixelated tool. This action might look like something that would also happen in a certain situation in the human world, but it looks more like something that happens in a virtual world. There is connection, but the connection is tied to the narrative of the game: the action and its representational aspects come clear through the story and setting of the game. For example, early low-resolution games formed actions and objects from a limited number of pixels. To distinguish an immobile five-pixel snake from an immobile five-pixel stick the player would need the guidance of the narrative and cultural context.

This means that dropping the narrative opens a different game world. Things might be recognizable, but without the narrative aspect, they lose their representational relationship. The player is dealing with the actual virtual environment as it is. The aim is to see the actions in the game world not as

shadows of something, but as actions in their own right. A virtual tool is a virtual tool, not a poor representation of the "actual" one – a virtual reality is a distinct, unique reality. Gameplay as performance happens when the player deliberately abandons the objectives and narratives of the game, and starts to use the game in a new way. Here also the frame of performance transforms the relations of the player and the game.

One way to approach gameplay as performance is through the concept of performance art. In the field of contemporary performance research performance artists often contemplate on the shift from ordinary to art. Finnish performance artist Pilvi Porkola (2015) writes that for her ordinary things, for example objects, gain their art or performance quality through gaze, distance and context. In her example the action of looking at a teacup transforms into performance when it is framed as performance. (2015, p. 354) Hence, art is what we frame as art. Porkola's teacup is only one example of performance art as the wondering of everyday things, events and phenomena. Same kind of attitude also transforms our actions in videogame. Regardless of the presence or absence of outside spectator(s), if we decide to base our actions on artistic intentions, they are art. And, as every action is done in the moment, it is performance.

For my PhD thesis, I conducted pieces of performance art inside *Minecraft*. They were autoethnographic explorations into the environment and the conventions of the environment. I would for example stand still in one place for an hour, letting the virtual time pass around my avatar. These kinds of actions alter the reality of the game: by refusing to comply with the stimuli, the dynamic of the world changes from active to passive. The frame of performance transforms the space. (Huuhka 2019, pp. 230-232) Performance alters the flow of time. Usually gameplay is full of sensory stimuli to keep the player immersed in gameplay, often losing touch of the "real" time. Standing still refusing the stimuli kicks the player/performer out of the symbolic time of the game into the event time of the performance. Performance is what stays after the predetermined actions melt away.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to explore similarities between video games and performances, and to expand the notion of artistic performance to gameplay. Presented approaches can be used in the production and analysis of video game performance, or as a way to perceive any gameplay situation as performative. In my ongoing PhD research project I have two sets of research data on video game performance: autoethnographic performative explorations and two workshops on performance and gameplay, in the University of Konstanz (2017) and in the Tampere University (2019). Materials

have been documented by videos, screenshots and diaries. The future research will analyze specific performances in more detail based on the approaches presented here.

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