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## Mark R Johnson, Jamie Woodcock Fighting games and Go: exploring the aesthetics of play in professional gaming

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# **Fighting Games and Go: Exploring the Aesthetics of Play in Professional Gaming**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the varied cultural meanings of computer game play in competitive and professional computer gaming and live-streaming. To do so it riffs off Andrew Feenberg's 1994 work exploring the changing meanings of the ancient board game of Go in mid-century Japan. We argue that whereas Go saw a de-aestheticization with the growth of newspaper reporting and a new breed of "Westernized" player, the rise of professionalized computer gameplay has upset this trend, causing a re-aestheticization of professional game competition as a result of the many informal elements that contribute to the successes, and public perceptions, of professional players. In doing so we open up the consideration of the aesthetics of broadcasted gameplay, how they reflect back upon the players and the game, and locate this shift historically and culturally within the last two decades of computer games as a creative industry, entertainment industry, a media form, and as an embodied practice.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2016 "Evolution" tournament - the largest fighting game tournament in the world, run annually in various locations across Las Vegas - reached new heights this year in terms of monetary impact, scope, visibility, and importance. The tournament gave out hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money to the victorious players across almost a dozen different fighting games; it was watched live by perhaps a million unique viewers across a range of online channels, and many more have since watched the recordings; and marked a watershed moment for the visibility of competitive and professional gaming. This moment was the live broadcast of the finals of the hugely popular *Street Fighter V* (2016) on ESPN, one of the most visible and successful global sports broadcasters. Such an occurrence signals a newfound cultural acceptance of competitive gaming, its growing comparability to the existing modalities of sports broadcasting and audience engagement, and is emblematic of the newfound meanings of computer game play. No longer are computer games pure play and leisure, but now form professionalized careers for many players. Similarly, games are not just played in one's home or with friends, but can now be broadcast to millions. These two changes signal the need for a substantial reappraisal of the cultural meanings surrounding acts of gameplay, specifically in this case with regards to the impacts of professionalization and live broadcast. Appreciation of the varying social contexts of play and how they shape the play experience has previously been explored by Feenberg & Grimes (2005) and Kirkpatrick (2013), and this paper therefore offers a further step in this growing body of work.

To do so, we offer this paper as a dialogue with Andrew Feenberg's 1994 paper "Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture". This previous paper (which we relate in more detail below) examined the changing values assigned to unchanging forms of gameplay - the desire to win, and the strategic and tactical choices that move a player towards that objective - in the ancient Eastern board game of "Go", specifically with regards to the story of

a particularly noteworthy game related in Yasunari Kawabata's 1951 novel "The Master of Go". The headings below in our paper are taken from Feenberg's *Alternative Modernity* paper but adjusted or tweaked to reflect our concern here with contemporary digital games, but to nevertheless examine the same set of questions over gameplay meaning that Feenberg was concerned with two decades ago. As such, we first briefly explore the interactions between fighting games and the surrounding environment in competitive fighting games, and the nature of skill in these games. This is distributed across decision-making and high-speed reflex actions, the second of these being what signals the major diversion from the study of professionalized *board* games, which we explore in some depth in order to understand the kinds of players who engage in these games, and how their demographics and actions shape the visuals of professional gameplay.

Proceeding into its main analysis, the paper considers the disruption of previous forms of professional gameplay by the rise of broadcasting and professional computer gaming, the change in audiences, and the complexity of computer games compared to board games that prevent their easy reduction to a sequence of simple steps. We then explore the questions of 'etiquette and equity' invoked in Feenberg's paper, and how they both resonate with new consequence and meaning in the emerging sphere of professional video gaming. Rather than the comparison in *Alternative Modernity* of aestheticism in the East and West and their impact upon the game of Go, we next trace a comparison of three kinds of gaming aesthetics - in the arcade, in the home, and broadcast online. We conclude by reflecting upon the full range of newfound meanings of gameplay that are created through these twin processes, and argue that such elements outside of formal games that now contribute to the career success of professional players suggest a return to the concern with the *aesthetics* of skill, beyond pure rationality, as exemplified by the classical Go style of play. This exists within the present stage of a distinct historical trajectory of the relationship between play, practice and spectatorship, which we will unpick in the process, demonstrating that

### **ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY? PLAYING THE JAPANESE GAME OF CULTURE**

In 'Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture', Feenberg (1994) explores the depiction of a Go match in Kawabata's (1969) *The Master of Go*. He argues that the literary recreation of this contest is a critique of the formal and rational strictures of modernity, as materializing in Japan at the time of the match - 1938. In doing so he develops Kawabata's work as a critique of formal rationality, proposing a paradigm shift in the approach to the game heralded by the emergence of 'Westernized' players into the competitive arena. He proposes that games 'exemplify formally rational systems', comparable to modern institutions that are likewise 'characterized by explicit rules [and] unambiguous measures' (Feenberg, 1994:108). Traditional Go was concerned with the aesthetic production of the perfect game as well as the pursuit of victory, whereas a more modern approach involves 'manipulating the new meta-rules [...] and is more ruthlessly oriented toward winning at any price, even if it means sacrificing the intrinsic rationality of the game' (Feenberg, 1994:134). This led to a shift in the play of Go and the emergence of players concerned with victory at all costs, rather than concerned with victory in a game understood as a spiritual and aesthetic discipline as much as a rational and mechanical game system. This was coupled by the growth of Go reporting in newspapers, which inevitably elided all dimensions of play except the context-free recording of the moves made, and perhaps the time those moves took to be

decided upon. As Feenberg (1994:133) puts it, ‘the novel shows us two alternative ways of playing Go constructed around different formal dimensions of the game. Both ways aim at victory but under different aspects.’ This highlights the possibility for highly divergent cultural meanings to be attached to the same in-game actions - i.e. the pursuit of victory - and the broader political, social and historical changes they can represent, perhaps even co-construct.

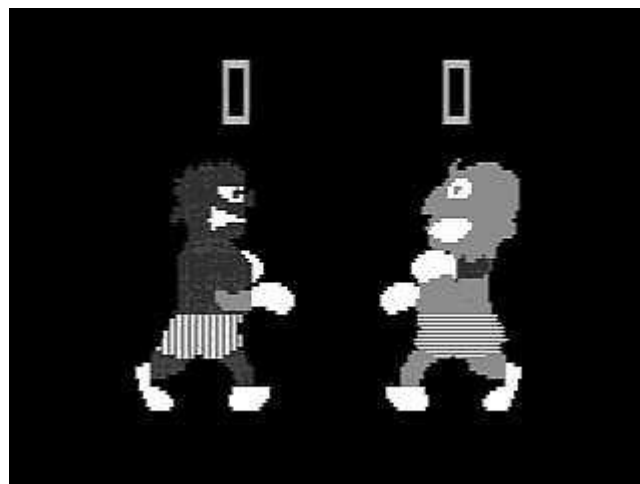
The particular meaning of “aesthetics” in this context merits further elucidation. Feenberg suggests that within the Japanese context, the “pursuit of self-realization through a Way manifests itself aesthetically, in this instance as the beauty of the board on which the dance of adversaries produces a magnificent and complex pattern” (1994:116). The use of the word “beauty” here is especially important, for this is in keeping with Feenberg’s other writing on the relationship between nature and human-made artefacts. Kirkpatrick (This Issue) explores this topic, noting Feenberg’s reference to “natural harmonies” that exist between the natural world and the human world, which can be seen for example in the fractal similarities of a mathematical proof and a shell on the beach. There are certain echoes here of social theorists who build upon complexity theory or Deleuze’s ontological propositions, such as Manuel DeLanda (2011, 2013, etc), whose work exhibits a comparable concern with what we might call the mathematical or systemic aesthetics of life, and human perceptions of non-human patterns and forms of order. Whereas standard technical instrumentalism involves manipulating the resources of nature into the forms humans wish them to inhabit, the kind of natural aesthetics Feenberg seems to push towards are forms where the technical and natural exist as one.

This is therefore the deeper question of technological aesthetics being considered here – not just that the rise of modernity affected Go on the level of the play of the game (instrumentalism instead of beauty), but that it marked a deeper shift from a harmony between the human and the natural in the mathematically or aesthetically beautiful play of the Go board, towards a play of Go that treats the Go board as a natural resource to be utilized without care. In turn, much of Feenberg’s wide body of work hinges upon the proposition that the social practices and assumptions surrounding technical artefacts do not only construct the technology and its use, but also connect artefacts to much broader networks and constructs of social and political life. In this case the wider network is the global rise of modernism in ways of thought, behaviour, technological instrumentalism, and aesthetics, which played out in a number of ways with regards to the use of natural resources and technology. In the case of Go, this meant a loss of interest in working *in tandem with* the Go board, and replacing that with the desire to *use* the Go board in pursuit of victory. The paper therefore offers a convincing examination of the different cultural values that might be assigned to the same technical motions of play - the placement of white and black stones upon a board - especially with regards to the “rationalized” de-aestheticization of Go and the shift away from the shared experience of play, and towards the formal record of stone placement. Within the parlance of the modern emerging discipline of game studies, we can utilize here the work of Carter *et al.* (2012), who distinguish between the ‘*orthogame*’ - the formal rules of the game being played as ‘expected’ - and the ‘*paragame*’ - non-formal elements surrounding and influencing the play of the game. This was a move away from interest in the Go ‘*paragame*’ and away from treating the ‘*paragame*’ as integral to the

experience of Go, towards the greater formalization, and reification, of the ‘*orthogame*.’ What ‘used to be a unique spiritual performance, is reduced to a mechanically retrievable spectacle’ (Feenberg, 1994:120), with substantial impact upon the communities of Go players, the way the game itself is actually played, and the role and place of the game within the wider culture it affects. However, with the rise of competitive and professional *computer* game competition, we propose that this shift has now reversed in professional gaming, and that the ‘*paragame*’ elements of world-class competitive gameplay have once more become absolutely essential to such play. It is such a claim this paper now explore, building off the structure of Feenberg’s paper to consider this *re-aestheticization* of competitive gameplay, the absolute importance of immediate *spectacle* to professional competition, and how these visuals affect professional gaming communities and practices.

### THE WAY OF FIGHTING: GAME AND ENVIRONMENT

In order to discuss the rules of fighting games it is first necessary to delineate the subject of our investigation. Games often contain ‘reactionary imperial content, as militarized, marketized, entertainment commodities’ (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 228), which means that most games involve fighting of some sort, such that the range of what we might call fighting games ‘is potentially endless’ (Harper, 2014:8). However, this term does refer to a specific genre, which must be unpicked from a range of surrounding genres which also include elements of combat. The basic conception of fighting games can trace its history back to Sega’s *Heavyweight Champ* (Figure 1) in 1976 (Ashcraft, 2008). This boxing game, rendered in black and white, saw two boxers facing each other down from the two sides of the screen. Although dated today, it laid down the basic formula that has been developed and iterated on since,.



*Figure 1: screenshot from “Heavyweight Champ” (1976), showing two characters facing off in a boxing match, with their respective scores displayed above the avatars’ heads. Photo from:*

[http://www.arcade-museum.com/game\\_detail.php?game\\_id=8099](http://www.arcade-museum.com/game_detail.php?game_id=8099)

Following this there were various attempts to develop the format. The most important of these were *Karate Champ* in 1984 (and the multiplayer update a year later) and *Yie Ar Kung Fu* in 1986. These may have laid the groundwork for modern fighting games, but they were not as popular as shooting games in Japanese arcades at the time (Ashcraft, 2008), and as

Harper (2014:11) has argued, ‘these [older] games have little in common with how fighting games are understood today’ (Harper, 2014:11). It was the arrival of Capcom’s *Street Fighter 2* (Figure 2) in 1991 that introduced the modern fighting game. Two fighters – drawn from a range of characters with different moves and special attacks – face off against each other and battle to reduce their opponent’s health to zero over timed rounds. Due to this combination of rules, ending with ‘whoever won two rounds first’ being ‘declared the winner’, Harper (2014:11) therefore argues that it is ‘no wild leap to call *SF2* the progenitor of the modern fighting game.’ This has indeed become the archetype of the 2D fighting game, introducing rules and mechanics that have been repeated and developed since. The most notable developed came with the move to a 3D battlefield with the Sega’s *Virtua Fighter* in 1993. Such a format was developed in the *Tekken* and *Soul* series, and adopted in the notoriously graphically violent *Mortal Kombat* series, which became noted both for its volume of bloodshed and for the ‘fatality’ moves in which one player’s avatar disembowels the other in any number of particularly bloody ways



Figure 2: screenshot from “Street Fighter 2”. In this screenshot “Ryu” and “Ken” are facing off; the yellow denotes their current health, and the orange denotes their loss of health. The visual placement of elements in this form have become the default for “2D fighters”. Photo from:

<http://www.kotaku.co.uk/2015/02/05/three-occasions-witnessed-people-insane-things-games>

On this basis Harper (2014:13) provides a five-part working definition of fighting games. The first part is that ‘these are games of close-quarters combat’, differentiating the genre from the FPS (the first person shooter), for example, and identifying the common terms of reference in which players compete. The second is that ‘characters in these games have standard and special attacks, or “moves.”’ This provides the rule set and tactics by which players engage. The third is that ‘match parameters are quantified on-screen in some way’, whether through timers, counters, or otherwise. The fourth is that ‘fighting games are

competitive', allowing players to battle directly against each other and for a victor to emerge at the end. The fifth, 'and most importantly to fighting game fans', is that 'these games allow for multiplayer competition.' The combination of these five elements give us a robust definition of the fighting game to proceed with in the rest of this paper, in which we use both fighting games generally, and their play and presentation at EVO 2016 specifically, as our point of departure.

The environment in which fighting games is played, however, has changed substantially. The *arcade* style arrangement - two players facing the same screen, joystick and buttons, with potential viewers observing the match, and the competitive framing and expected culture that goes alongside it (Johnson, Forthcoming) - is important to understand as an early example of competitive video game play where *observation* was absolutely core to the cultural experience. In this vein, Lin and Sun (2011) have illustrated the importance of the 'onlooker', a concept also taken up for studying how players perform in an online context by Crawford and Rutter (2007), which draws our attention to the fact that gameplay inevitably represents a 'discursive relationship' between the audience and the players (Harper, 2014:5). This applies whether the audience is only the players themselves reflexively perceiving their own gameplay and reflecting back upon their own practice, other players online, in an arcade setting, or even in a modern professional setting. The presence of an onlooker can come to shape and influence the actions of players, and therefore the in-game actions of their avatars, and the form of aesthetic produced by these play actions. At the intersection therefore between these two elements - the one-versus-one fighting game and its heavily formalized and standardized technical visual design, and the under-examined aesthetics of reception of gameplay by players, viewers, commentators, and supporters - lies the central concern of this work. The interaction between these games, and the crowds in front of which they can be played, will now form the foundation of the paper's analysis of the new emerging aesthetics of viewed and broadcast gameplay, and how these elements have evolved and changed since the days of mid-century competitive Go.

### **NO-MIND: THE STRUCTURE OF REFLEX**

We begin with a consideration of skill. In his paper, Feenberg explores the concept of 'no-mind' and relates it to the discourses of skilled play within Go player communities. In the context of Go, he describes 'no-mind' as being emblematic of the loss of all self-awareness, the 'freeing [of] the actor from inhibiting concentration on either self or other' (Feenberg, 1994:114). He relates that young Go players claim such a mental state is absolutely essential to being able to compete at the highest level, and that one must become emptied out of all other concerns and thereby able to focus - without, actually, *focusing* - on the game itself, and nothing else around it. There is a similarity here with the experiences of immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005) and 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Nacke and Lindley, 2008) in contemporary video games. In Go, such an attitude also has a strong connection to the notion of the aesthetic and spiritual victory - he argues that 'at the height of the most intense competition, the players are joined in harmony in the construction of the board, much as signers respond to each other in a piece of complex choral music' (Feenberg, 1994:115-116). Of course, as being a somewhat quasi-'spiritual' doctrine, this would not necessarily be an attitude advocated by more rationalistic, victory-at-all-costs players; despite the claims that it is

essential to success as a means for the player to come upon strong tactical moves and a strong strategic game plan, it is nevertheless also an altered psychological state that eludes and evades easy categorization. We can therefore suggest that “flow” or “no-mind” bridges the two levels of such gameplay – the mechanical and the “spiritual” – and therefore, in game studies terminology, the orthogame and the paragame. Flow enables the most skilled play but also the most profound experience of play.

However, the components that contribute to the mechanical side of flow change between games. Alongside tactical and strategic choices, a primary difference between professionalized *analogue* games and the professionalized *digital* games we examine here is the *physical* component to skilled gameplay (Taylor, 2012:37). There are processes of physical practice and the development of rapid reflex - which Ferrari (2013:5) terms ‘drilling’ and Witkowski (2009) terms ‘training’ - required. Players must master ‘layer upon layer of physically demanding action in order to be competitive’ (Witkowski, 2012:369) in these computer games, *as well* as being able to formulate and carry out long-term strategic decisions, and make skilled on-the-fly tactical decisions, often with only seconds or even part of a second to respond: this, again, is in clear contrast to analogue games where players may be given parts of a minute (Bridge), minutes (Poker) or even hours (Chess, Go, and so on) to respond. This is the case in all fighting games, all other professionalized video games, and in highly-competitive games that do not (currently) have the superstructure of organizations required to enable players to earn a living through their play. We can also see this through an instance of auto-ethnographic insight: the first author currently holds four world record high scores in the “bullet hell” genre of computer game, which is likely the most ever held simultaneously by a Western player. At the levels of skill required to meaningfully compete for a world record score, there is similarly not the time for one’s conscious mind to register all the bullets on-screen that must be dodged, and their present and future trajectories; one must instead pursue a state similar to the concept of no-mind, and allow oneself to respond intuitively and responsively and without agonized analysis of every move. As Feenberg (1994:114) notes, such ‘loosening of focus banishes hesitation and fear and improves fighting performance’, and this is just as true for *tactical* decisions as for *high-reflex* responses.

As a result of the reflex requirement of these games, we can also perceive a substantial demographic shift in high-level competitive play when compared to the Go professionals that Feenberg (1994) and Kawabata (1969) are concerned with. In *The Master of Go*, the Master’s career is many decades long, and it is only in his old age that he is defeated by the young challenger. This is indicative of the careers of many professional board and card game players, who are able to play at a top level well into middle-age, and in some cases even longer; without the requirement for *reflex*, there is no reason why only the youngest players would be able to compete at the highest level. Equally, in the case of Go, age meant veneration and respect, which actively encouraged older professional and highly-skilled players to continue and lengthen their playing careers. By contrast, we can see a compression and acceleration of the competitive gameplay career for professional and non-professional world-class *computer* game players. Less than one percent of professional (or non-professional but world-class) computer game players are above the age of thirty, and a relatively small number are above the age of twenty-five; those who retire have tended to transition into training and management roles, or commentary, or leaving the world of professional gaming altogether. There is also a strong youth culture surrounding these games which would further discourage



the participation of older players even if the reflex questions were not so pressing. Although “masters” still exist within professional gaming, these masters are now individuals in their late twenties, rather than in what we traditionally conceptualize as ‘old age’; this limits the ability for generational gaps of the sort described by Feenberg (1994), instead producing a steadier and more constant flow of players entering and leaving the competitive arena, often with extremely short careers. This has altered, therefore, the broadcast visuals of competitive gaming into an aesthetics dominated by young players with the sight of none above the age of thirty. There are no spectacles of venerable masters being challenged by youthful up-and-comers; the ages of both categories run so close that we instead see players defined by their achievements and quality of play only, not by their age or “experience”. This thereby removes a fundamental element of the particular aesthetic spectacle of the single match described in *The Master of Go* and the attendant possibility for a thematic battle between generations and types of players, and resulting - as we shall see - in aesthetic interest being found elsewhere.

### **THE PATTERN DISTURBED**

As we noted earlier in the paper, fighting games started as an *arcade* pursuit: two players compete, with the option of a local crowd observing the fight in person. This brought with it particular practices of play and expectations about behaviours, which are beyond the scope of this paper but have been explored extensively elsewhere (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003; Colwell & Kato, 2005; McMillan, 2010; Harper, 2014; Johnson, Forthcoming). However, what is relevant to us is that as arcades became less popular and games consoles proliferated, gameplay increasingly took place behind closed doors. This meant a competition between people who already knew each other, unavailable to a wider audience, and somewhat isolated from a larger community. After this first step - “broadcasting” to a local crowd in the arcade - and the second step - playing within the home and therefore *not* broadcasting - we propose a third step, whereby gameplay is now increasingly broadcasted, or streamed, *online*. This forms an important component of the contemporary growth of eSports, involving the professionalized play of computer games at a competitive world-class level, including tournaments, managers, teams, sponsors, advertisers, and the buy-out of large arenas across the world for the largest competitions (Witkowski, 2009; Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Seo & Jung, 2014; Martončík, 2015). Broadcasts provide access to gameplay that would previously only have been available to professional gamers or attendees of physical tournaments. This growth, Taylor (2016:115) has argued, fundamentally ‘represents the legitimization of gaming as spectator sport.’

Such broadcasting of gameplay was first popularised on platforms like *YouTube*, with players uploading clips of gameplay that would be watched later. The short format of fighting games with the time limited rounds, as opposed to the much longer bouts of real-time strategy games like *Starcraft II*, made fighting games particularly suitable to this format, but it is the live streaming of gameplay on the recently-emerged *Twitch.tv* platform that is fundamentally reshaping the way players and viewers interact with games. Rather than watching pre-recorded footage of games, viewers can now watch players live, and even interact through a live dialogue with a text-based chat window. There are new ‘communities of practice’ emerging through Twitch, particularly with the ‘roles of mentorship and apprenticeship’ taking ‘part in the production of learning (Burroughs and Rama, 2015:3). Rather than looking over the shoulders of competitors in an arcade, or waiting for a turn on a console in a living

room, platforms like Twitch provide what Hamilton et al. (2014:1315) term a 'virtual third place' that allows 'informal communities' to 'emerge, socialize, and participate.' These communities are themselves constituted of 'gamer-spectators', which include 'game casters' who are broadcasting their live gameplay along with a commentary performance, professional eSports players and aspirants who seek such a position, and 'gamercast viewers', who are the increasingly large online audience that watch these streams (Hamilton et al., 2014:1315). These developments are extremely contemporary within the field of video game play, and represent a departure from the forms of viewing of competitive gaming prior to the modern era which had to be done in person, or mediated through newspapers and reports after the event.

The phenomenon of streaming therefore involves comparable dynamics to the small groups gathered around screens, whether in arcades or the home, or the large crowds of tournaments; albeit on a massively increased scale and mediated in a new way. With an estimated viewership of 200 million (and an explosion of physical tournaments, estimated to be at over 75,000 last year) eSports is becoming decidedly mainstream (Superdata, 2015:13). The creation of new institutions and organisations, like those around Riot Games' *League of Legends* or the German-based *Electronic Sports League (ESL)*, offer the possibility for professionalisation of eSports competitors. The base of viewers and would-be competitors (along with the large amounts of speculative advertising money) is now sufficient to support a layer of people who compete in tournaments, both online and offline. Many eSports stars supplement their income and build their fame by regularly streaming on *Twitch* - something that is watched by an increasingly large number of regular viewers. Streaming is therefore a mutation of the previous phenomena of individual and collective interaction with games. As Harper (2014:7) notes, 'gameplay is not static, but rather something experiential and fluid', and, moreover, 'even the act of *observing* a game and socially engaging the player can present, in its own way, a type of play' (Harper, 2014:7).

We can therefore see an intriguing divergence from the previous forms of play spectatorship. Whereas Go's *paragame* elements and the spiritual-aesthetic discipline they constructed and reflected were reduced or lost through newspaper reporting, wide broadcast supports the *paragame* elements of competitive video-game play instead of rendering them irrelevant or tangential. Feenberg (1994:120) refers to newspaper reporting of Go matches as a kind of 'mediated mass spectatorship', but acknowledges that 'newspaper readers are in immediate contact only with the contextless chart of the unfolding game, the thrust and parry of successive moves, the final drive toward victory, all of which can be printed exactly as played.' This is a mass spectatorship, but mass spectatorship of only the technical components of the game, mediated through a print rather than a digital or broadcast medium and therefore time delayed and lacking in all or almost all *paragame* elements, even if the reader can still derive some sense of the overall game aesthetic from the recounting of the moves. The technical specifics of Go can be printed and *understood* precisely as played, whereas professional or other high-level competitive computer gaming cannot. This is not because computer games are somehow not systems in which every move can be related, because of course they are, but because of the immensely larger volume and complexity of moves that must be recorded. Professional fighting game players perform hundreds of actions per minute, and a single set of games (best of three, or best of five) can last up to ten minutes. Naturally some of these inputs do not translate directly into the actions of the in-game characters, as some might not

be recorded (“dropped”) by the game, or others might be overridden by other inputs, but this could nevertheless mean that upwards of *four thousand* moves would have to be recorded, as opposed to the two hundred or so moves of a Go match. Equally, these moves would require far more information than Go - in Go one can record the coordinates and player of the move and that is all that is required, whereas in *Marvel vs Capcom 3*, for example, players command several characters who would have to be identified in the recording of the move. Equally, of course, many in-game actions take place without a move - if one player launches a projectile against another player, that is a *move*, but the outcome of the move - the impact of the projectile - might take place far later and need to be recounted, which would push the number of recorded *events* far above even the number of recorded *moves*.

The point here, of course, is that competitive computer games are too complex to be reduced to a sequence of moves that could actually be parsed and understood in a written or textual form. They cannot be reduced to the ‘mechanically retrievable spectacle’ of Go, a mere ‘match’ (Feenberg, 1994:120) devoid of context. By contrast, streamed recordings of professional gaming matches *do*, of course, record the context - they record the match itself, the behaviours of the audience, the cheering and comments of the viewers, the expressions and physical actions of the players, and so forth. We can therefore perceive the first component of a re-aestheticization of professional gameplay driven by the impossibility of meaningfully conveying the game’s action, even in its most pared-down action-driven form, if one cannot also convey the direct original *sight* of the game. It is possible that the world’s best players might be able to fully understand the play of a match if given a list of moves and their precise timings and locations, without any visual data, but even this seems highly unlikely. The concerns over instrumental modernism outlined in *Alternative Modernity* are not present here, and therefore professional gameplay has moved away from the reduction of the play of games being understood as movements and coordinates back towards the irreducible importance of the visual dimension. In turn, the broader elements of the performance and therefore the aesthetics of gameplay as a collaborative act, as we shall see, return to the forefront. Broadcasting the aesthetics of play is crucial therefore to making the game understandable to fans or others interested in the competition, and we see here the reverse of Go: a game that cannot ever be reduced to less than its visual elements in the dissemination of gameplay to wider audiences. However, there is more to Feenberg’s notion of the aesthetics of Go than this element, which we now explore in the professional gaming context.

### **META-RULES: ETIQUETTE AND EQUITY**

Feenberg (1994) identifies two important ‘meta-rules’ to the structure of Go play: those of ‘etiquette’ and ‘equity.’ The first refers to appropriate levels of deference to certain players and respect for the rules of the game. The second refers to ensuring equality, within certain constraints, between the two players. Etiquette is still strongly reflected in competitive computer gaming, although in some very new and very distinctive forms, primarily created and enabled by the specific affordances of gaming technologies, as well as an emerging set of social norms drawn from very different historical and cultural origins to those of Go. Equity has, if anything, become more prevalent in professional gaming, with the possibilities of exploiting rules or loopholes reduced to the barest minimum. In this section we therefore explore these two dimensions to the aesthetics of competitive and professional play, outline

the many new forms of etiquette and the far fewer forms of rationalistic equity we can find within eSports and streaming, and how these affect the play of competitive games and viewers' *expectations* of that same play.

### *Etiquette*

Feenberg (1994) identifies *etiquette* as the first set of crucial meta-rules in Go; deference to the more senior player, what we might term a "gentleman's agreement" to not manipulate rules, and so forth. We see a set of etiquette requirements in competitive (fighting) games as well, but they are very distinct from those outlined in the historical play of Go. There are many forms of etiquette around professional gaming, the central elements of which are arguably warming up, giving the other player time and space, appropriate levels and kinds of cheering and fan or crowd support, and the almost automatic acceptance of money matches. Fighting game players are allowed to "warm up" before a match, by carrying out what is called a "button check" on their controllers to ensure everything is working properly, and it is extremely rare that such a practice would be forbidden or considered unacceptable. In board games and card games, of course, there are no such procedures beyond ensuring that all pieces are present or all cards are within the deck. One is also expected to wait for the other player between matches, up to a certain point; too long is considered to be poor form, but a pause of up to perhaps a minute is generally accepted, although no formal rules exist.

Cheering amongst the crowd, meanwhile, is actively encouraged within the gaming arena, but cheers are only of a certain sort - they most often are cheers for the name or "gamertag" of the player, or at most cheering for the national origin of the player, especially if two nations with extremely strong fighting game communities (such as the United States and Japan, and to a lesser extent, South Korea) have players battling for a title. Cheering of the sort found in professional sports such as football, often insulting and derogatory, is frowned upon in smaller venues, and entirely unacceptable in larger venues. Many leading fighting games figures suggest that cheering should be entirely *for* your player of choice, rather than *against* the player they are facing. Lastly, many fighting game players engage in "money matches" either outside of or during tournaments, which are games played with a specific amount of money at stake; it is ordinarily considered embarrassing and cowardly to decline a money match unless the difference in skill is obviously ridiculous - a professional challenging someone who has just bought the game. When a match is proposed between players generally considered to be of roughly equal skill, declining the match will negatively affect one's standing in the community, especially if a substantial amount of money (hundreds or thousands of dollars) has been offered as the wager.

These elements all have elements of strong reciprocity and expectations upon players from both sides that structure competitive communities and the behaviours of their players. As Feenberg (1994:112) notes, games are 'collaborative performances' that necessitate 'various forms of reciprocity', ranging from simply alternating moves to the far more complex consideration of the opponent's state of mind, strategy, and future intentions, as well as granting your opponent the same affordances that you would hope they would grant you. These above elements are therefore all important parts of the aesthetic performance of professional gaming. They demonstrate the willingness of both players to be sporting, and to focus upon producing the best possible *collaborative match* by giving each other time to warm

up, take a break, and so forth, whilst also maintaining an irreducible element of competition. We therefore see here another return to a style of play and player behaviour akin to the pre-modern style of Go - players *are* concerned with the production of an aesthetically-pleasing game, through displaying their skill and abilities, but this comes from a set of social norms around sportspersonship, rather than the understanding of the game as a quasi-spiritual experience or practice. In turn, because competitive gaming has to be broadcast in all its visual detail (both the virtual game and the physical players) rather than having the moves recorded, witnessing this dimension of collaboration and co-construction of competitive gameplay is effectively *unavoidable* in consuming professional gameplay. The aesthetic dimension is therefore returning to the forefront through the mutual reinforcement of these norms of play, and their broadcast as a crucial component of pro-gaming competitions.

“Cheating” - although a concept subject to potential ontological contestation, where different actors can attempt to position the agency and therefore blame for cheating upon others (Johnson, Forthcoming) - is naturally also forbidden in competitive gaming etiquette. The rules of competition must adhere to the rules socially agreed upon by the entire gaming community (Taylor, 2012) - unlike Go and other board games, computer games always carry with them the possibility of glitches, errors, lag, and exploits (cf. Meades & Canterbury, 2012), and it is therefore up to subcultures to delineate the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate play. There also exists an even vaguer middle-ground between acceptable and unacceptable play - that of “cheesing”. Cheesing involves identifying strategies or tactics that are unreasonably strong and are aspects of gameplay the designer’s meant to include, but that players believe do not give one’s opponents a “fair” fighting chance, and then using these moves or decisions in the pursuit of victory. As Kawabata (1969:54) himself says, ‘When a law is made, the cunning that finds loopholes goes to work. One cannot deny that there is a certain slyness among young players, a slyness which, when rules are written to prevent slyness, makes use of the rules themselves.’ In addition to the prohibitions on ‘cheese’ moves or strategies, in various games have players have adopted negative views on character choices. For example, in *Tekken 3* there were various moves that could be repeated to ‘cheese’ a round, for example, the flip kick move of the character “Law”. Similarly, the bonus characters Doctor Geppetto Bosconovitch (Doctor B) or Gon, due to their different mechanics and size, were arguably frowned upon. This can also be seen in non-fighting games, such as players who propose that the character Oddjob (only two-thirds the size of other avatars) should never be used in multiplayer *Goldeneye*. Cheesy strategies exist entirely within the formal rules of the game, but may strongly break the social rules of the game. Such etiquette is not always appreciated or understood, however - not through *deliberate* subversion of rules, but simply through innocence and newness to the competitive arena, as amusingly illustrated by Harper in a tale of an early fighting game contest he emerged victorious in:

‘I’m not quite sure how, but I managed to beat him, and believe me when I tell you, it had to have been a fluke. I remember watching him turn to me with a frustrated expression, saying in an exasperated tone, “Oh, usin’ cheesythrows!” I also recall not understanding what he was talking about; my young ears heard “chinsey” rather than “cheesy” and I assumed he was telling me the name of a secret technique I was using to defeat him. I can only imagine his exasperation when I turn to him and said, bright with pride at my perception of his approval, “Yeah! Chinseythrow, for sure!”’ (Harper, 2014:1-2).

Therefore, one must play with the *right kind* of slyness, with the “clever” or “innovative” move rather than the “cheap” or “cheesy” move, and such distinctions do not stem from the technical confines of the game. The encroachment of modernity upon Go was fundamentally about the bending of such social norms, and yet in professional gaming - clearly a far more “modern” practice and activity - we see another kind of modernity, where in-game behaviours have been disciplined, formalized, and made ever more exacting within specific confines and rules, rather than debateable in-game behaviours being pursued by players seeking to negotiate and exploit the loose boundaries of cheating, cheesing, and legitimized play actions.

### *Equity*

The second of the important meta-rules in Go is identified by Feenberg (1994) as *equity*. By this he refers to ‘artificial equalization of the players who, in everyday life, are sure to be subtly differentiated in ways the game ignores’ (Feenberg, 1994:112-113). He argues that ‘the reorganization of Go around Western notions of fairness is not a move from particular to universal but merely shifts the balance of power in favor of a new type of player’ (Feenberg, 1994:112-113) - the kind of player who, as above, is willing to exploit and pursue loopholes and behaviours that are fully contiguous with the formal ruleset of the game, with regards to the alternate placement of stones and the small number of rules governing in/valid moves, but do not necessarily match up to the social expectations of how the game should be played. As we have seen above, such exploits are strongly condemned within professional gaming, and any match that does not conform to norms and expectations will be rendered null and void, even if the formal rules of the games are adhered to. In this sense we can suggest that the sense of equity is stronger than ever before in professional gameplay, but *no longer comes* at the cost of the aesthetic or quasi-spiritual elements of no-mind or flow, nor at the cost of the importance of setting and context to understanding the moments of play. We therefore see the expansion and development of professional gaming etiquette to reflect the reflex requirements of the game, the spread and formalization of these norms, and the growth of the expectation of equity between the game’s players. Such developments crucially do not *subvert* the immediate play experience and the rich social context of the game through their equalizing tendencies, but they rather *enable* this very experience.

### **PROFESSIONAL PLAY AND (DIS)HARMONY**

Feenberg (1994) traces two different forms of aestheticism with regards to Go - the “Eastern” aesthetic of the sublime spiritual experience aiming towards the artistic perfection of gameplay, and the “Western” aesthetic of the formalized recording and repetition of the moves and the changing situation upon the board, and the decontextualization of play from the context in which it was originally created. In this section we will propose the return of the “Eastern” form of aesthetic – the artistic perfection of gameplay – has taken on two forms within contemporary professional gaming. One of these is indicative of the profound harmony between the game, the two players, and the mathematical perfection of the game as found in classical Go, whilst the other is the very opposite of this: the play of the game by a player who seemingly has little respect for their opponents, but whose technical mastery and ability to play to the crowd, i.e. to inculcate *disharmony*, is equally compelling and speaks to contemporary dynamics of competition – both within gaming and wider society.

The professional or semi-professional players of fighting games (as well as other genres) are subjected to new pressures when they live stream their play and performance to an online audience. When they play, the aim 'of course', like Go, 'is to win.' However, also like Go, there is a new objective in their practice. For Go, this involved 'a higher interest in the aesthetic achievement of "harmony" and pattern' (Feenberg, 1994:116). For streaming, the equivalent is the pursuit of a style of play that is conducive to building an audience. The beginnings of this can be found in the arcade and the living room: the performance of the victory will be judged in terms of its validity within the social rules of the game and for the aesthetic or stylistic value, as well as its technical skill. An important example of this can be found in the *Mortal Kombat* series of games and the 'fatality' feature. After winning the standard rounds of the game, the winner is offered the opportunity to perform a fatality, which requires a complex chain of precise button inputs. On a successful input an overly elaborate, hyper-violent, scripted death sequence is played. A failed input, on the other hand, usually produces a misstep and a basic attack, often a relatively limp jab - ending the game and failing to showcase the player's proficiency, and indeed showing their *lack* of proficiency. This part of the fight has no outcome on the score, but rather provides an additional opportunity to perform to an audience, which highlights the importance of the audience to competitive computer gaming since its earliest periods.

To understand these two ongoing professional player aesthetics – the harmonic and the disharmonic – we must first consider what Harper (2014) calls 'normative play'. This means 'how players feel games *should* be played'. For example, winning an eSports match a particularly noteworthy and particularly respected way elicits more commentary focused upon that player, more articles written after the event about the player's impressive skills, or their snatching of victory from the jaws of defeat, their ability to perform moves with a speed or precision that few can equal, or the selection and successful execution of a high-risk high-reward strategy that did, indeed, pay off (see Figure 3). This is how the game "should" be played - exciting and compelling, with a battle between two skilled combatants. These ideas construct the perceived personalities and interest of professional gamers, and therefore their value for sponsorship. Professional gaming sponsors - such as technology companies, or non-endemic advertising for energy drink companies, banks and credit cards, and other organizations seeking to access this demographic of players and consumers of professional gaming content - sponsor players for their *visibility* and fan-base, as well as their *skill*. When so much of their income does not come only from winning in the game, professional gameplay can no longer be seen as just objective-driven rationality. The perception of how players play, how they should be played, and the audience's perspectives on these questions are just as integral as the actual technical skill of players to creating a professional gaming career, rather than distracting from the ability to execute the game's technical and strategic requirements.

There is therefore a crucial new development here that must be appended onto Feenberg's theory of game "aesthetic" if it is to accurately represent the current state of contemporary gaming, having moved on as it has since the days of Go. In Go, the rise of capitalism and modernist instrumentalism resulted in a reduction of the game's aesthetic dimension and left behind only a context-free recording of the moves, and a new breed of player who were concerned only with playing to this element and omitting Go's previous status as a richer aesthetic discipline that focused upon player-player interaction as much as the players' use

of the game systems. In professional video gaming we see the re-emergence of the concern with the harmony of the game and the players, but in two distinctive ways. Some players present themselves as having tremendous respect and admiration for their opponents, whilst others present themselves as being iconoclastic, rebellious, and in some cases even abrasive and arrogant. Both partake in visual broadcasts that inevitably maintain the player-player interaction as well as the player-game interaction, both are concerned with presenting their own play in a certain manner with regards to what we can usefully understand as Feenberg’s notions of harmony, and neither reduces the game to its purely technical minimum, but are instead concerned with the construction of two particular aesthetics of interpersonal behaviour. They engage in either the cooperative construction of the beauty of the game, as in classical Go, or the agonistic construction of that same beauty, but both acknowledge the richness of the game far behind the moves played on-screen. In the case of the iconoclastic player we can divine something of the younger challenger from *The Master of Go*, but in this case playing *alongside* notions of harmony and visual spectacle, rather than undermining them.



*Figure 3: screen capture from the ‘Super Smash Brothers Melee’ event at EVO 2016. The right-hand player, known as “Hungrybox”, has rarely been a fan favourite due to negative perceptions of a defensive and “unexciting” play style; however, after a 3rd, 2nd and 2nd place set of finishes in the last three years, and an adjustment to a far more aggressive play style, his victory in 2016 was greeted with rapturous applause. The first half of this case shows how fan appreciation is not always contiguous with the highest levels of skill, blurring the lines of “justified” sponsorship and therefore professional careers, whilst the conclusion of this case also demonstrates how readily fan affectation and interest can change and shift depending on context, not technical performance, alongside the reception of the players’ different attitudes to the game and each other.*

### VIRTUAL PLACE AND ALTERNATIVE AESTHETICS



In this paper we have sought to engage with the concerns of the cultural meanings of gameplay identified in Andrew Feenberg's (1994) 'Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture', and to interrogate and update its questions for the contemporary world of live-broadcast professional video game competition. Following the approximate structure of this original paper, we have examined: the emergence of fighting games as our illustrative case study; the reflex requirements of such games and the short professional careers of the world's most skilled gamers; the newly integrated rather than jarring role of broadcast media; the continued importance of 'etiquette' and 'equity', both identified by Feenberg, and their metamorphoses into new forms; the different aesthetics and meanings of offline, online, and broadcast gameplay; and how these meanings affect rankings and perceptions of player skills, and therefore affect sponsorship, and in turn are actually integral to the practice of professional video gaming. In the process we have seen a clear return to the 'aesthetic concern' that Feenberg (1994) outlined with regards to the pre-rational or pre-modern model of Go play - prior to the rise of modern 'Western' rationality in the play of Go, the objective was not just to win, but to emerge victorious in an aesthetically-pleasing and almost 'spiritual' manner. This trend declined with the pursuit of victory for its own sake, and the rise of newspaper reporting that reduced games of Go to only the moves played and their sequence, rather than the body of social meanings, cultural practices and interpersonal behaviours surrounding them.

In this paper we have demonstrated the return of this trend to its original form, and that *professional* gaming has now therefore become fundamentally 'recontextualized as a performance' (Feenberg, 1994:124) as well as a deeply skilled technical component. The performance aspects of Go, that vanished in relevance with the rise of print media and a new kind of Westernized player, have adopted a renewed importance in professional *computer* gaming and its live broadcast towards thousands, and sometimes millions, of viewers. The performance is integral to pleasing the crowd, gaining sponsorship, adhering to certain social norms, and in turn becoming a full-time professional gamer, but as spectacle was essential to the original pre-modern aesthetic form of Go. Equally, the difficulty of transmitting computer game records without visuals prevents the severance of context and content, ensuring that the two must be kept together in order to maintain the experience, and that this unity forces viewers to see both the "technical" and "non-technical" elements of the game together.

As Feenberg has argued for years, therefore, the wide social and political networks within which technologies exist are crucial to consider. In early Go the cultural assumptions of the Way informed the pursuit of spiritual harmony; in late Go the rise of capitalist instrumental modernity governed the decline of this element of Go play and the renewed focus upon the purely technical victory-oriented game components; and now the modalities of internet broadcast and technical game complexity influence the resurgent centrality of the cooperative aesthetics of gameplay that are essential, somewhat paradoxically, to high-level competition.

Towards the end of his paper Feenberg proposes that after the shifts towards rationalized modernity that Kawabata (1969) described, Go would from that point onwards be played 'more as a business than as a spiritual discipline' (Feenberg, 1994:131). In high-level

competitive computer gaming, however, we see that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive - mastering flow, playing to the crowd, a pleasing style of gameplay, the primacy of tournament context and meeting social expectations all go hand in hand with the increasing professionalization of the field, the growing volumes of prize money on offer, and the ever-shrinking boundaries within which acceptable models of play (not cheating, and not cheesing) take place. Feenberg (1994:108) was quite right to note that 'apparently neutral forms of play turn out to be loaded with social, cultural, and historical content', but we cannot look to older and in many ways outmoded forms of professionalized gameplay to understand the *present* context of this field. We have therefore developed here a contemporary re-engagement with his paper, highlighting new answers to the questions and analyses that Feenberg posed, and outlining the present state of the intersection between gaming aesthetics, the games industry, and the actual practice of gameplay itself.

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