

Rhythms of Gaming Bodies

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ABSTRACT

In Martin Amis' description of Pac-Man (Namco, 1979) from *The Invasion of Space Invaders* (1982) he notes: 'I have seen bloodstains on the PacMan joystick... ..I know a young actress with a case of PacMan Hand so severe that her index finger looked like a section of blood pudding – yet still she played, and played through her tears of pain'. This is a far cry from notions of videogames as immersive virtual worlds, and the player as an actor in those worlds! Amis is highly aware of the way that videogames engaged both the mind and the body of the player: 'the vivid melodrama of these games doesn't just involve and absorb the player: it makes him sweat and pant. With his lips thinning and his eyes bulging, he seems to take it all very personally'.

The body of the game player is an under-theorized area of videogame scholarship. Martti Lahti is 'As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games' (2003), argues that the focus on the cerebral process of play in early videogame scholarship ignored the ways in which videogames were increasingly seeking to immediately realise the audio-visual aspect of the human sensorium. In this paper I wish to move beyond this examination of representational strategies to explore the role that the body of the gamer has in game play.

This approach, exploring the game beyond the screen, demands a more open, contextual approach to the praxis and processes of videogame play. Using data from fieldwork conducted in Caracas, Venezuela and Melbourne, Australia during 2005, this paper will explore the role that the body of the gamer has in videogame play.

Keywords

Bodies, Cyclical Rhythms, Everyday Life, Videogames,

1. INTRODUCTION

The body of the gamer has certain rhythms; recurrent needs to eat, drink, sleep, breathe and defecate, and more transient needs to socialize and move. Imbricated in this are the rhythms of play, the movement of the eyes across the screen and hands on the keyboard or joystick. Other rhythms are enacted by the game, and through the game, but these machine rhythms will not be discussed here. This paper focuses on the cyclical rhythms of the body, and how these rhythms structure the material experience of videogame play. This element of play is important to appreciating the significance of location of play in contextualizing its process. This paper first explains the notion of the 'gaming body', then it examines the cyclic rhythms of the gaming body, before moving on to several examples that demonstrate the ways that cyclic body rhythms – sleep, eating and defecation – shape the experience of play.

2. THE BODY OF THE GAMER

The gaming body is not a body in the literal sense. Rather it is a collective that is produced to meet the needs - and desires - of the body of the gamer. Lefebvre describes the body in rhythmanalysis as a bundle or garland, which is composed not only of different objects, but also of rhythms – composed of time, places, and energy [3]. The bundle that is the gaming body is in a state of polyrhythmia as it contains diverse rhythms. Rhythms that are rooted in the mundaneness of the everyday: the need for a toilet, food, drink and sleep. Also overlooked are more general material concerns: access to platform/hardware, software, power, adequate lighting, headphones and other sound equipment, a place to sit, spaces in which gamers will not be disturbed or disturb others; practical matters that are prerequisites for play, that shape – and importantly, also constrain – the experience. The bundle of gaming body is a network composed of the elements required to produce play with the literal body of the gamer as its central node. The importance of these aspects to videogame play demonstrates that the composition of the gaming body is an important factor in understanding the experience.

The inter-relation of these various factors to produce the gaming body is a testimony to the activities frailty. The emergent demands of the everyday may intrude on and disrupt the process of play if the gaming body does not have the necessary contingency to meet them with rapid expediency. The gaming body places a peculiar demand on a space: curtains drawn in the daytime; a proliferation of fridges and food; seats and chairs are moved to bring the body at an ideal distance from the screen [1]. The organization of everyday life around the gaming body indicates the mundaneness of the activity. Videogaming is often positioned as a break or rupture with – or escape from – the bleakness of the everyday. Bernardette Flynn in 'Geography of the Digital Hearth' (2003), argues that consoles transform televisions from domesticated object into virtual portals that are openings to 'cybernetic fantasies of speed, danger, and freedom', that challenge the notion of the domesticity of the home and pit themselves against it [1]. Positioning videogame play as a rupture in the everyday – the mundane, the domestic – both overlooks the myriad ways in which the gaming body is insinuated and reliant upon the everyday, and plays into Henri Lefebvre's discussion of the break between everyday life and leisure. In *Everyday Life in the Modern World* he states:

Today leisure is first of all and for (nearly) all a temporary break with everyday life. We are undergoing a painful and premature revision of our old 'values'; leisure is no longer a festival, the reward of labour, and it is not yet a freely chosen activity pursued for itself, it is a generalised display: television, cinema, tourism [2].

Conceptualizing videogaming as a type of rupture thus divorces it from the quotidian; the renewal of the festival that suggests everyday life could be different. A notion of videogame play without a commitment to the everyday implies that the activity falls into the modulated leisure of the control society. The notion of the gaming body returns the study of videogames to the materiality of that experience, to the mundane reality within which play takes place, and the way that play transforms it. Videogame play may be a form of evasion from everyday life, but the desire to evade or depart from everyday life is itself a symptom of its existence.

3. CYCLICAL RHYTHMS

The gaming body has a particular rhythm that intersects with the rhythm of the videogame. Andrew Murphie describes this interplay as the production of a 'duration' [5]. I suggest that this duration is enacted through the intersection of what Lefebvre calls linear and cyclical rhythms, which he describes as follows:

The cyclical originates in the cosmic, in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles, etc. The linear would come rather from social practice, therefore from human activity: the monotony of actions and of movements, imposed structures [3].

The videogame has a linear rhythm, the gaming body a cyclical rhythm. To produce a 'duration', for the games rhythm and the rhythm of the body to resonate in each other and to harmonize, the rhythms must enter into a metastable condition that Lefebvre calls 'eurhythmia' [3]. The relationship between linear and cyclical rhythms is complex, the interactions often slip into unstable states where one rhythm starts to dominate, or interfere with, the other. Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier in 'The Rhythmanalytical Project' (2004), describe the relation between the rhythms as characterized by an 'antagonistic unity' [4]. This precarious stability is evident in the rhythmical relations of the gaming body and the videogame; the cyclic rhythms of the body – broken toilet, no coco-cola – or the linear rhythm of the game, in the form slow loading times or large gaps between saves, lead to the disharmonious state of arrhythmia – the term that Lefebvre uses to describe disruptions to the stability of the smooth intersections of linear and cyclical rhythms [3]. Arrhythmia is a pathological state, where the gaming body ceases to function as an organic whole. This emphasizes, and exacerbates, the fragility of the equilibrium of the gaming body, which is caught between managing its own cyclical demands, and the linear rhythm of videogame play to produce a duration of eurhythmia.

4. EXAMPLES

4.1 Food

The linear rhythm of videogames comes not solely from the mechanics and structures of the digital worlds, but also from the social structures that develop around their play. In Melbourne during the spring of 2005 while conducting ethnographic research at 'Cyberia', a cyber café close to the central business district, I came across a peculiar scene. A group of restaurant

workers arrived at the café early on Sunday morning right after work. The four men entered loudly, warmly greeting the café workers, and organizing optimal seating. They booted *World of Warcraft* (2004, Blizzard Software), and began to discuss their agenda for the days' play. These four players planned to meet with a larger group in order to perform a collaborative mission or 'raid'. While they were waiting for the rendezvous time they reflected upon their working situation at a 24 hour café, and also discussed their game avatars' 'talents', and how to maximize their 'talent trees' for the raid. This discussion focused around one players' avatar, and while two of the other players' provided contradictory advice, the fourth player took orders for coffee and headed to the Victoria Markets to get four coffees. From the matter-of-fact conversation between the members of the group, it was apparent that the coffee was to alleviate the fatigue and strain of working all night. While he was gone, the administrator for the raid closed the roster, and when he arrived back to the café he was refused permission to take part in the raid because he had not entered his name in the roster by the stipulated rendezvous time. Consequently he watched his colleagues play for several hours before returning to their shared accommodation to rest. The coordination of the raid had been complicated by the game server being located in the USA, along with most of the other people that were to go on the raid. The deadline of 11am Saturday in Los Angeles became 6am on Sunday in Melbourne. The disruption the body's rhythms to the extent that additional sustenance is required is not a new phenomenon; however, in this example it contributes significantly to arrhythmia. The gaming body's need for stimulants – in this case –excluded it from play, because the linear rhythm of the game and the game community demanded that the cyclical rhythm of the body remains subsumed in it.

4.2 Toilet

At least 'Cyberia' had a toilet; a place to extrude and expel waste. Located in a back room the toilet was rather poorly maintained – no soap or towels at the washbasin – and very dirty. I saw on more than one occasion people steeling themselves to go in there, taking a moment between play and defecation to mentally prepare them selves. Once I noticed a young woman leaving the bathroom visibly upset, drying her hands on her boyfriend's jacket before returning to the game of *Ragnarok Online*, that they were both playing. He was waiting for her to return, their avatars were side-by-side inside the virtual world of *Ragnarok*, while she was in the toilet he was chatting with other players online and when she returned they quickly resumed their activities; looking for monsters to kill to get treasure and experience. The linear rhythms of games need to be flexible enough to enable players to leave the game world from time to time. Not all of the demands stem directly from the maintenance of the body, the social or cultural demands which dominate the location of play are outside of the game itself, but they also posit potential interventions – and interruptions – in play which players must negotiate.

4.3 Social

In particular videogame rhythms must be able to accommodate the sociality of the site. In the twelve-computer cyber café on *Avenida Avila*, in San Bernardino, Caracas, some players' alternated between videogame play and socialization; the shifts

were immediately evident from their demeanor and the ways that they positioned their bodies. Silent concentration, focused at the computer screen, alternated with a more conversational and relaxed – but no less playful – attitude that involved looking away from the screen to make eye contact with others, looking at other screens, and even leaving the computer momentarily. This socialization often included people who were not engaged in play, who were either using the computer for another reason, who had come to the café to buy candy or cold beverages, or had entered the café deliberately to catch up with a friend. This strong social milieu was an additional layering of linear rhythms on the site. The impact of these rhythms was evident in both the types of games that were played, and in the style of play. In the case of the variety of games played, two common cycles emerged: games that have rhythms that repeat cycles of intense play followed by less interactive – either narrative or set-up – periods, for example *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* or *Gunbound: World Champion* (2005. Softnynx); and games which were characterized by rapid but intensely engaging play, which could be easily incorporated into a variety of other activities, in particular *Half-Life: Counter-Strike*. Sociality also impacted on the style of play, in particular in relation to sound, where games with strong sound cues, like *Age of Empires II: The Conquerors* (2000, Ensemble Studios), were played without headphones – or with the headphones around the neck, but not actually sitting on the ears – in order that the players be included in the general offline sociality occurring in the site. This element of sociality multiplies the individuals included in the bundle of the gaming body. It also marks the flexible delineation of the site itself, as people would congregate outside both ‘Cyberia’ in Melbourne, and Cyber Café ‘Avila’ in Caracas. In Venezuela, the congregations were primarily social and would often draw in passers-by momentarily, outside ‘Cyberia’ it varied sometimes a collection of individuals smoking or checking their mobiles, other times a more clearly established group talking together in English, Mandarin, or Vietnamese. By focusing on the rhythms of gaming it is apparent that videogame play, and the site of play, is at the core of a bundle, which by tracing networks and connections may be construed widely.

5.CONCLUSION

The gaming body is formed from entwined cyclical and linear rhythms. Each of these rhythms brings new bodies to the aggregated bundle that makes up the gaming body. The cyclical rhythms suggest that the physical needs of the body of the gamer, and the ways that meeting these needs are organized be considered as a key part of the gaming experience. The linear rhythms of play, and the sociality of play, indicate that both the mechanical rhythm of play itself, and the wider rhythms of everyday life also impact on the experience of gaming. The analysis of rhythm challenges the concept of videogames as a closed system.

6.REFERENCES

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