Games on Working, Games on Gaming, Working on Games, and Games on Working on Games: On the self-referentiality that entangles neoliberal play and work

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Keywords
Play, Work, Ludology, philosophy of computer games, play theory, politics, neoliberalism, media-archeology, self-referentiality

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Building on computer game studies and philosophy of computer games, we postulate self-referentiality as a recurring feature in the mediality of computer games, i.e. in their hermeneutic and representational aspects and the cultural practices they facilitate. Then, building on media-archaeology and critical theory of computer games, we describe how self-referentiality can provide a critical perspective on the nature of technological play/work in the context of neoliberal information society (e.g. Galloway 2006, Crogan 2018), computational media, the resulting ludo-mix, and possibilities for "transgressive" (Aarseth 2007, Jørgensen & Karlsen 2019) and "authentic" play.

Consider *PC Building Simulator* (The Irregular Corporation 2018) - a game in which gamers can build their own gaming PCs, using officially licensed gaming PC parts. The open-world building game *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) has witnessed players constructing functioning computers inside the computer game and playing other computer games, like *Pong* (Atari 1972), with these machines. Noteworthy is also *Control*, an art game in which players are to manipulate a variety of virtual retro game controllers. In addition to the more straight-forward work-simulators like *Job Simulator* (Owlchemy Labs 2016)*, in some games, like *Arcade Operator* (Nolan 2016) and *Game Dev Tycoon* (Greenheart Games 2012)*, the player faces the condition of someone working specifically on computer games while "playing" a computer game herself.

How to deal with the relationships manifested in these examples? Are these best described as forms of "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999), or "transmediality" (Juul 2003, Jenkins 2007, Wirman & Leino 2016), made possible by e.g. "modularity" of digital media (Manovich 2001, 49-66)? Perhaps we could talk also about "metagaming" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017), but how many "metas" should we be prefixing the term with? We argue that they are symptomatic of a more substantial undercurrent, visible also in another set of examples.

Consider also some less useless games: card-games for game designers to use for brainstorming new game ideas (Kultima et al. 2008), and, games like *while True: learn()* (Luden.io 2019), teaching coding to children through a simulation of being a CTO, perhaps with the intention that one day they become computer game designers. Educational games have, however, lost their monopoly on games and education, as also e-sports (Witkowski 2012, Taylor 2012), has been described as contributing to learning and acquisition of transferable skills (Kow & Young 2013). The emergence of games on working, games on gaming, working on games, and, games on working on games, and, their adaptation into the cultures and economies of gaming, we argue, can be described as functions of self-referentiality inherent to the mediality of contemporary computer games.

What we see in common between these examples, is self-referentiality on different nested 'levels': at least hermeneutics, representation, and cultural practices. In terms of hermeneutics, unless we are talking about insoluble puzzles (e.g. Karhulahti 2013), each computer game can be described as containing the standards for its own interpretation: "to show that we understand a game, all we have to do is to play it well" (Aarseth 2003, 5). Hence, in terms of representation, computer games can be only about themselves: through the aesthetic means at their disposal, they can only refer inwards. Rather than representing something, they eventually just present themselves (e.g. Wardrip-Fruin 2009). Thus, any reference from the game to outside itself is at best an accident. The cultural practices specific to gaming are, by definition, derivative of the game artifacts, and thus trapped within the aforementioned hermeneutic and aesthetic constraints, as these are the constraints also by which the player exists. To transgress them would be to become a non-player in the particular instance of gameplay. Hence, it seems fitting that 'gaming practices', broadly defined, are centered around measuring and quantifying different forms of striving for self-realization, self-management, and self-fashioning, e.g. in the forms of showcasing one's games collection on Steam, becoming a professional e-athlete, or counting subscribers on Twitch.TV.

Pias (2017, 33–60) suggests that the early 20th century developments in "work sciences" (Arbeitswissenschaft) which contributed to the modernist idea of industrial work share the same conditions of possibility from which "action games" emerged. Thus, similarities between industrial "work" and "play" in early computer games are not surprising, but rather, expected. Following Pias (ibid.), we suggest that the manifestations of self-referentiality identified in our examples are traceable to the nature of computer games as *computer* games, and, that the development that created early computer games has anything but stopped: the neoliberal aspects of the computer game form described by Möring and Leino (2016) did not emerge out of the void but rather, the same neoliberal technocapitalism which creates computer games also created the society we live in, and, ourselves as subjects.

We argue that self-referentiality in contemporary play/work is not an exception, but a characteristic of the neoliberal condition (e.g. Feher 2009) in the context of computer gaming: even those games which are not explicitly about computers, work, or games, are structured by the same underlying political-economic principles of management

and computation. Consider *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), which has been designed intentionally to critique structures of capitalist economy by making the player live the life of a downshifter-dropout characterised by low-tech self-sustainability. Players' comments, however, tell of the necessity of keeping track of and fulfilling an abundance of tasks in order to stay alive, let alone be successful. Hence, we observe that the under-current of self-referentiality in computer games runs deep enough so that even those games which attempt to criticise neoliberal society end up perpetuating its principles.

Thus, somewhat paradoxically we suggest that computer games can only be about computer games, but computer games are always already about society at large, while what is neoliberal society, if not a gamified form of life. This paradox may be disturbingly illogical, but closing one's eyes on the prevalence of self-referentiality serves only the purpose of maintaining a hopelessly 'romantic' modernist notion of play as happening inside 'magic circle' - an unfulfilled and already expired utopia. Instead, the transferable skills learned from eSports may indeed prove useful.

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