Consciously working on one's game: the mutual constitution of habitus and identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to extend existing work on 'gamer *habitus*' (Kirkpatrick 2012, Crawford 2012) through questioning the conceptual adequacy of the Bourdieusian (1993) understanding of *habitus* in its being able to account for how players refine their practices in the process of learning to play computer games competently and how they come to acquire certain dispositions towards the games that they play.

'Gamer habitus' has been defined as 'the socially acquired, embodied dispositions that ensure someone knows how to respond to a computer game' (Kirkpatrick 2012, 19) that is attained through experience. Indeed, becoming competent at computer games may be especially revealing not only as to the way in which we acquire a 'habitus', which is in part due to the speed with which we attain gamic competence, owing to the analytical learning cycle afforded by computer games (Arsenault and Perron 2009) and the fast feedback loops.

I will argue that a player's gamer habitus is more consciously formed and reworked than has been supposed under Bourdieu's theoretical framework, that Bourdieu's habitus may not be sufficient for explaining why some players pursue the play routines that they do. Indeed, the capacity to consciously hone one's skills is a wider question that has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature on habitus (cf. Ingold 2017).[1]

The implications of this investigation bear on understanding the extent to which we consciously 'choose' our habits and the skills that we develop; the acquisition of gamer habitus is an exemplar of a conscious self-fashioning that is informed by prevalent discourses of the self. I contend that a greater proportion of habit formation can be understood as a form of self-subjectification that is potentially in synch with neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2008, 63) than as the outcome of a pre-conscious or mechanical habituation with little room for the role of the *sens pratique*, or practical reason (Burkitt 2002, 224). Thus, the terrain of gaming presents itself as a prime site on which to practice a form of bodily subjectification that intersects with forms of conscious self-identification (as a speedrunner, as a casual gamer, a walkthrough writer, etc) that often have a powerful socio-cultural valence.

This is based on the reading that Bourdieu's (1993) understanding of *habitus* has obscured certain older roots with the Greek term *hexis*, from which it was translated.

Although its parameters are contested, *habitus* has arguably come to have a much narrower application – one more associated with 'habit' (Hutchinson 1986) than was *hexis*. Aristotle defined *hexis* as 'a state of character' that is more enduring than a mere disposition (Categ. 8b 27-28 in Aristotle 2012), and *actively* pursued, rather than passively acquired. As such, it could be unreflective but *also* freely chosen, in a way that contrasts with the implications of Bourdieu's class reproduction analysis. Emphasising this aspect brings *hexis* further away from formulations that underscore good play as merely a 'dogmatic' form of habituated bodily knowledge. Instead, it is brought closer to the work of Simondon on the reciprocal relation between psychic and collective individuation (Scott 2014), or Foucault (1987 [1984], 1990 [1984]) on the care of the self.

I emphasise the *mutual* constitution of habitus and player-identity or typology, expanding habitus from its narrower Bourdieusian formulation to reconnect with hexis. One 'chooses' to acquire, or persists in working towards, a particular gamer habitus based on one's self-identification, but one's self-identification is also decided partly on the basis of one's non-cognitive and embodied responses to the game (and one's reflections concerning the latter). This is not, however, to disregard that the sedimentation of habitus can also be involuntary or unchosen.

This theorisation, concerning the mutual constitution of habitus and identity, sets the groundwork for future investigations into how players consciously shape their gaming dispositions (and the difficulties they face in doing so), particularly in their attempts to master certain skills, to develop their capacities in distinct areas. If the malleability of a habitus, its potential for transformation, is proportional to its degree of sedimentation, then one may be able to speculate as to the degree of sedimentation of various gamer habitus based on players' reported ability to adapt them. Further, there is scope for this research to be joined up with, and to inflect, existing work on the representation of gamers in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, as a mode of influence on their pursuit of certain kinds of gamer habitus.

Endnotes

1. Blackman (2010) has criticised the dichotomy between affect and cognition that would see processes like skill acquisition consigned to the non-conscious, while Bourdieu (1977 [1972]) has often been accused of a neglect of agentic consciousness in his emphasis on 'reproduction' over 'transformation' (Noble and Watkins 2003, Crossley 2001, 92).

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