

The data assemblage of play: Videogame data analytics and surveillance

Ben Egliston

University of Sydney
Sydney, 2006
NSW

benegliston@gmail.com

Keywords

Data analytics, post-phenomenology, software, surveillance

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago T.L. Taylor called for videogame play to be understood as an assemblage, adopting this vocabulary to think about game play as ‘happening’ through uneven relations between heterogenous human and nonhuman actors in and ‘outside’ the game (2009). Over the last several years, there has been growing commercial popularity of analytics platfrms used in gaming. Increasingly, they are sold as subscription based ‘guide’ services to assist players in their gameplay. Often, these are spruiked by marketers as a supplement to one’s gameplay and a method for improving one’s own performance. In this way, 10 years on, perhaps we revise, and update Taylor’s claim slightly, looking at much of multiplayer gaming as a ‘data assemblage’ – understood as the assemblage of human and data, with significant outcomes for our ways of doing and being (as shown in broader studies of data assemblages in mediated life, see Lupton, 2017).

In this paper I look at the specific example of DotaPlus – a subscription-based analytics platform used in the game Dota 2. To situate DotaPlus as a platform, we might classify it as what Srnicek (2017) calls a ‘product platform’, where users ‘rent’ to access through a monthly subscription (\$4US/month). It might also be understood as something with the agential capacity to shape human experience and perception – consistent with recent sociotechnical accounts of platforms, emerging from media and software studies (see e.g. Bucher, 2018; Langlois, 2014).

More specifically, in examining DotaPlus as a platform, this paper argues that videogame analytics are a site of what Nick Srnicek has recently called ‘platform capitalism’ (2017), an economic and infrastructural logic predicated in large part on the surveillant accumulation of user data. Drawing from Zuboff, through these surveillant practices, we can understand platforms as a “new form of information capitalism aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control.” (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75)

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

© 2019 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Extending this perspective, this paper argues that gaming analytics as sites of platform capitalism, represent an economic and infrastructural shift in Dota2, but also a transformation of the phenomenological experience of playing the game – doing so through the capture and relay of different forms of player data, from various modes of surveillance.

To make this point, I draw from Bernard Stiegler’s concept of grammatisation (2010), which denotes the abstraction of temporal experience into some discrete, spatial form (e.g. speech to writing), and the consequent changing up of the temporal structure of human action (i.e. how they remember the past and anticipate their futures), directly informing how people think, feel and engage their environment. In short, the numerical or statistical ‘quantification’ of play – reliant on tracking – produces new and economically desirable qualities in play, transforming how players affect and are affected by the play of Dota 2.

To develop my argument around the case of DotaPlus, this paper focuses on three distinct sites of surveillance: self-surveillance, lateral surveillance and ‘platform surveillance’.

The first part focuses on the self-surveillance utilities of the platform, arguing that the collection of, relay, reflection upon gameplay data in realtime represents a grammatisation of the somatic and cognitive experiences involved in play. The game’s interface shows the player’s performance, in real-time, relative to the average performance (at that time) of other players at a similar skill level (see Egliston, in press). The second part of the talk considers the kinds of lateral surveillance (after Andrejevic, 2004) afforded by DotaPlus – which refers to a mode of ‘peer surveillance’ – that is, of watching others, but also being watched. I discuss here the ways that players can view detailed data logs of their own (and others’) performance in real time, potentially shaping future encounters with the game. The third part of the talk considers what we might call platform surveillance - focusing on the platform’s specifically machine-learning based features, enabled by Valve’s collection of user data. Through this collection of user data Valve provide dynamic systems of prediction and probabilisation which enroll players into particular, anticipatory regimes in negotiating each match (further, see Egliston, 2019).

In exploring these three sites of surveillance, which variously grammatised gameplay activity through data, the theoretical argument I advance here is that the digital traces of player activity, captured and fed back to users in the form of DotaPlus guides, significantly alters the experience of playing Dota 2 – done in a way that is economically desirable for the game’s developer. This talk is expected to be of interest given the ongoing relevance of supplementary, paratextual materials in gaming. It is also pertinent given that data tracking is becoming given that data tracking is becoming ever more so central an aspect of our everyday lives, and to our ludic activities. In this way, understanding the practices, techniques, and technologies involved, as well as some of their implications, is expected to be of relevance to scholars studying games in the current moment and future to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrejevic, M. (2004). The work of watching one another: lateral surveillance, risk and governance. *Surveillance and Society*, 2(4), 479-497
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If...then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Egliston, B. (in press). Quantified play: Self-tracking in videogames. *Games and Culture*.
- Egliston, B. (2019). Videogame analytics, surveillance, and memory. *Surveillance and Society*, 17(1-2), 161-168.
- Langlois, G. (2014). *Meaning in the age of social media*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lupton, D. (2017). Feeling your data: touch and making sense of personal digital data. *New Media & Society*, 19(10), 1599-1614.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Stiegler, B. (2010). *For a new critique of political economy*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity.
- Taylor, T.L. 2009. The assemblage of play. *Games and Culture* 4(4): 331–339.
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of information technology*, 30, 75-89.