# On Seeing and Being Seen: Perception and Visibility in Video Games

**Rainforest Scully Blaker**

University of California, Irvine

rscullyb@uci.edu

## Keywords

Player, game, power, critical play, critique, actors, systems, countergaming

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, I begin with what may seem to be a self-evident proposition: the relationship between a player and a video game is one rooted in power. This is not to be read as a comment on some social pressure to consume media objects nor is it a rehashing of the idea that a player is pitted against a game as a thing to be won or lost. Instead, I employ Foucault's sense of power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate" (Foucault, 1990, 92) to frame the relation between player and game as follows: *just as a game is built to account for a player's actions, the player may equally aim to account for the game's*. At stake in this discussion is not simply the relation between player and video game (however that is my focus here), but rather the relation between actors and the systems under which they act writ large.

In this sense, I am deeply invested in Mackenzie Wark's conviction that "games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. *They are now the very form of life and death and time itself*" (2007, [6], italics my own). For Wark, it is only the disciple of "gamer theory" ([255]) who can properly understand and navigate the world as 'gamespace' in order to seek out alternative ways of being. And while I agree that the operational logic of 'game' pervades the world we live in, I also worry about Wark's suggestion that only intellectuals have a hope of unpacking or upending gamespace. Indeed, such a claim grates against Hardt and Negri's assertion that "a political alternative to Empire" will never "arise from a theoretical articulation" alone - "it will only arise in practice" (2000, 206). The form that such a practice may take is left intentionally open by the authors.

In the case of games and game studies, many have endeavored to bring about change through the practice of making games (Flanagan, 2009; Sampat, 2017). However, in this paper I wish to examine the revolutionary potential of how we may play games. Play, both within natural and virtual space, is something that we are all ostensibly capable of doing in some form, which cannot be said for the work of either Wark's gamer theorist who must read and understand critical theory or designers who must know how to code and have access to specialized technologies. Rather than offering an account of the uncomfortable likeness between labour and play that game scholars have been observing for some time (Taylor 2006; 2012; Dippel and Fizek 2018) or contributing to the discussion of the 'work' games do in disseminating ideology (Murray, 2017; Marcotte, 2018), I now wish to suggest that players might orient their workful play towards something more emancipatory. It is therefore my aim to explore play's critical potential in a manner that updates underdeveloped concepts such as Galloway's "countergaming" (2006), Schleiner's "ludic mutation" (2017), and Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter's "games of multitude" (2009).

It is in this spirit that I put forth the concepts of *visibility* and *perception*. Visibility here refers to the degree to which a larger system can account for the actions of those acting within it while perception is a measure of an actor's awareness and understanding of the methods through which a system understands their actions. Recalling Wark, these definitions are left intentionally broad to account not just for the relation between player and video game, but of anyone taking part in any game-like structure, whether knowingly or not. However, I limit myself to video game play here since if, following Crawford (1982), virtual worlds present "safe ways to experience reality," (15) then I believe that they may also be safe ways to experiment with and against the values of our late-capitalist age.

Visibility and perception are elaborated upon through a discussion of the ways that these concepts overlap in video game play. Through the use of gameplay examples from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998), I outline three 'gradients' of visibility and perception that, while non-totalizing, are helpful to signpost the variety of ways that the relation between player and game can unfold. I then broaden my discussion to larger questions of the critical potential of play and the reclamation of leisure from the logics of labour and capital, concluding with a brief discussion of the ongoing Game Workers Unite movement as a real-world example of resistance to the muddying of labour and leisure under post-Fordism.

By moving this conversation into the specific context of games and players, it is my hope to develop a richer understanding of play as something that can be contained yet radical, limiting yet iterative. Rather than suggesting that work and play ought not mix, I argue that working on and at play is a necessary form of labour if we are to find ways of living in opposition to the dominant. Playing critically here is a force for laying bare a game's operational logics so that we may judge them and change them accordingly. illustrative purposes only.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Crawford, C. 1982. *The art of computer game design*. Retrieved from https://www.digitpress.com/library/books/book_art_of_computer_game_design.pdf.

Dippel, A. and Fizek, S. 2018. "Laborious playgrounds: citizen science games as new modes of work/play in the digital." in *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* edited by R. Glas, S. Lammes, M. de Lange, and J. Raessens, 255-274. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

Dyer-Witherford, N. and de Peuter, G. 2009. *Games of Empire*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Flanagan, M. 2009. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Foucault, M. 1990|1978. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*. New York, NY, USA: Vintage Books.

Galloway, A. 2006. *Gaming: Essays in Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press.

Marcotte, J. 2018 "Queering Control(lers) Through Reflective Game Design Practices." *Game Studies*. 18 (3). http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/marcotte.

Murray, S. 2017. *On Video Games*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd.

Nintendo. 1998. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Nintendo 64, Japan: Nintendo.

Sampat, E. 2017. *Empathy Engines*. Seattle, WA, USA: CreatSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Schleiner, A. 2017. *The Player's Power to Change the Game*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

Taylor, T. L. 2006. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. 2012. *Raising the stakes*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Wark, M. 2007. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press