The Rhythms of Gameplay Between Stable Forms and Changing Flow

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, I investigate the notion of rhythm in digital gameplay theory. Rhythm is an elusive concept that can be used in a variety of contexts with differing interpretations. While rhythm determines especially the forms of music, dance and poetry, it can refer to any kind of movement that produces a pattern or a cycle, such as circadian rhythm or the heartbeat, or the rhythmic nature of everyday life (Lefebvre 1992). Rhythm has been considered as a property of both nature and works of art, but also the basis of human existence and subjecthood (Lacoue-Labarthe 1979; Lindberg 2010). In this paper, I focus on the concept of rhythm as a dichotomy between fixed form and changing flow (Benveniste 1971; Eldridge 2018; Lindberg 2010): does rhythm denote organic consistency or endless alteration? When digital gameplay is approached in terms of rhythm, this question illuminates the relation between player agency and algorithmic control.

Within game studies, the notion of rhythm is often mentioned in relation to gameplay and the functioning of the computer (see e.g. Anable 2018; Apperley 2010; Ash 2013; Costello 2018a; Costello 2018b; Cremin 2016; Deen 2011; Galloway 2006; Kirkpatrick 2011; Kline et al. 2003; Pias 2011; Salen & Zimmerman 2004; Turkle 2005; Väliaho 2014; Zhu 2016). Understood broadly as a repetition of a pattern, rhythm aptly characterizes play, especially when it occurs through interaction with an algorithmic system. While the rhythm of free play can be endlessly modulated and improvised, games that are structured with predetermined goals and obstacles provide a restricted framework for specific kind of agency (Nguyen 2019) and force the player to adapt to their predetermined rhythms. However, digital gameplay can also be viewed as a creative action, which brings the game into life (Cremin 2016). Gameplay is a confrontation between the rhythms of the player and the game.

However, digital gameplay involves different overlapping and alternating rhythms. For example, Costello (2018b) has analysed the synchronicity between the player's embodied actions and the audio-visual representation of the computer's responses to them by measuring the duration of button presses. As Costello notes, in addition to these rhythms of interaction, gameplay involves multiple overlapping rhythms, which differ in scale, duration and form. For instance, playthroughs and narratives have their own rhythms. Apperley (2010) provides a broader interpretation of rhythm with Lefebvre's notion of "rhythmanalysis", which focuses on the polyrhythmical nature of everyday life. Apperley uses this notion to situate gameplay to the wider context of game ecology that includes also commodification and globalization.

Costello's approach to the rhythm of gameplay focuses on the micro-level of game interactions through the correspondence between bodily actions and on-screen

representations, which creates a "game feel" (see Swink 2009). Apperley, on the contrary, focuses on a broader understanding of rhythm as both the algorithm that controls the player (see Galloway 2006), and the rhythms of the everyday that provide a possibility to resist algorithmic control through localized acts of play.

The rhythm of gameplay encompasses both the metric system of input and output that defines the feel of the game, and the repetitive discipline that subjects the player to algorithmic control. Instead of conceptual meaning, rhythm creates sense through embodiment, attunement and affect, and has a capability of touching the pre-subjective ground of human existence. However, stating that algorithm or gameplay have a rhythm merely implies that they involve repetition, but this does not actually tell anything about rhythm itself. While the rhythm of gameplay can be specified through sensomotory and proprioceptory aspects, this does not capture the full spectrum of rhythmic experience. Studying the metrics of game interactions gives important insight of rhythm in terms of game design, but remains detached from a societal critique, in which the notion of rhythm is used in a more abstract and often ambiguous manner.

Through a philosophical investigation, the multifaceted rhythms of digital gameplay can be approached through the distinction between stable form and changing flow. Examining the relation between rhythmic modulation and agency, the rhythms occurring in gamic interactions can be related to the wider context of algorithmic control. I will first investigate how the notion of rhythm has been approached in digital games research literature. Then I will introduce a philosophical viewpoint to rhythm as organic consistency and a form in motion, founding my insight to philosophical approaches to rhythm, such as Benveniste (1971), Eldridge (2018), Lacoue-Labarthe (1979), Lefebvre (1992) and Lindberg (2010). Lastly, I consider the relation between rhythm and subjectivity in terms of player agency, focusing on the dissonance between algorithmic control and the player's freedom.

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