How not to Play the Game? Disinvolvement and the Philosophical Analysis of Inaction in Computer Games

Alina Latypova
Laboratory for Computer Games Research
latypova.al@gmail.com

Alexander Lenkevich
Laboratory for Computer Games Research
ac.lenkevich@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The extended abstract suggests the approach to computer games analysis through the lens of inactivity, apraxis and disinvolvement.

Keywords

Disinvolvement, inaction, metagaming, zero player games, idle games, apraxis.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Action is a basic element of any game. Many texts have been written about action, interaction, agency (Stang 2019) in computer games. But there are games that suggest *not playing*. Or playing less (Alharthi et al. 2017), delegating the action to a computing system (Fizek 2018). In principle, computer games always include computing, following the impulses of Modern Age rationality, simplifying procedures, saving our time, working with our attention. However, operations with game environment have until recently been a privilege of the player: nothing happens if we do not click the buttons or control the processes inside the game. Today, we can name a number of projects that highlight "inaction".

Giorgio Agamben notes that "man is an animal capable of its inability" (Agamben 2010), i.e. capable of not acting, not reacting, not being active. The contemporary world withdraws this opportunity, requiring continuous action; our freedom supposes the ability to refuse to do something, for example not to enter into communication, or the ability to do nothing at all. However, current inaction games are encroaching on this freedom as well: for example, the Mountain game (OReilly 2014) is literally built on inaction, contemplation, and apraxism. If earlier contemplation was a strategy that stood against the logic of the game, now it is just one of the possibilities. We are already included in the game, whether we wish it or not, we are negatively integrated into the system. The political, aesthetic, ethical struggle is now unfolding not in the space of action, but in the experience of inaction, in determining its boundaries. Since the theory of practice, or praxeology (Smirnow 2012), is a developed field, we propose to develop the theory of inaction, apraxeology, disinvolvement, to find out if inaction in game, which is now included in the operating procedures, helps to take a distance, find a new territory of inaction, ataraxia and devastation. In other words, *contemplation after contemplation*, which helps us to return to ourselves, enriched by the knowledge of what we are and what we are not. The game is an ultimate sovereign ecstasy (Bataille 1986), "exit from oneself", which becomes more and more similar to exploitation with tight control, violence, and discipline. The logic of game development demonstrates a

movement from action to inaction (for instance, a phenomenon of Let's Plays), and now from *inaction to ...* to something new.

Inaction games can be analyzed from the different positions: they may be considered as an example of countergaming (Galloway 2006), parody (Garda 2013), game criticism (Sloan 2016), art criticism, metagaming, etc. Metagames here are understood as a variety of projects aimed at scrapping game conventions, on the one hand, and a resistance to market logic, on the other (Boluk and LeMieux 2017). Metagames do not always offer to take a contemplative stance, but they always rely on reflective procedures (for example, Broforce (Free Lives 2015) ironically refers to Contra (Konami 1987), plays with run and gun mechanics, etc.), which imply distance in relation to the game. Some metagames provide disinvolvement (an interruption of the game process due to the narrative or gameplay goals). In Return of the Obra Dinn (Pope 2018) action is immediately stopped so that the player can find the cause of the death of the ship crew. Each game supposes an "alter ego" – metagame. As a result, "metagames are the only kind of games that we play" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017). The logic of "games on games" is ambivalent (Trépannier-Jobin 2019): on the one hand, they help us to reveal a medial nature of the game, to comprehend their mechanics, to bring mythological (Barthes 1991) and ideological (Galloway 2012) constructs to the surface, to ironize over a form (Cow Clicker (2010) by I. Bogost), etc., on the other hand, they gradually enter the market, conquer their audience and create their own genre. Their rigorous potential is canceled: inaction and reflection are easily capitalized and turned into replicable tools.

We are interested in games that problematize action and inaction, games, which rely not on involvement and incorporation (Calleja 2011), but on *disinvolvement* and *excorporation*; such games enable us to free ourselves from mechanisms that work on discipline, immersion and keeping the player into the flow. Disinvolvement in games appears through a various game mechanics – and we are dealing with thoughtful colonization of the imagination, the capture of the inaction ability of the game devices. A pure act of disinvolvement is available only to a specific player who has fallen out of the game world due to *surprise, amazement, shock, etc*. We would like to pay attention to games that work with disinvolvement.

1) These are *reflective games* that break the fourth wall, such as The Stanley Parable (Galactic Café 2014), The Beginner's Guide (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), etc. The reflection mechanism is activated by games themselves (in game studies this tool is called "game on game").

2) These are games aimed at minimizing player activity, such as Dear Esther (The Chinese Room 2012), Stone Simulator (CHaosMD 2014), Mountain, etc. Such games, with rare exceptions, are limited to only one type of action – *contemplation*. Contemplative action has always occupied a special place in philosophy; it overcomes other types of activities: labor, work, action (Arendt 1998). In these games, it is possible to switch from the usual mode of active action and try to *look* at the game – to immerse yourself in it, as if it is a classic work of art. Walter Benjamin writes that the picture allows us to plunge into it, begin to contemplate and think, while cinema – as a new immersive medium – does not provide such opportunity. Cinema bombards us with images, preventing us from stopping, taking a distance; it invites us to join the rhythm of a new – revolutionary – life. However, over time, cinema also developed its contemplative techniques (see films by A. Tarkovsky, T. Kitano, etc.). Computer games as the medial successors of the cinema bombard the player not only with images, but also with series of actions (fighting games is the best example).

3) The third type of games is *zero-player games*, such as Game of Life (Conway 1970), The Progress Quest (Fredricksen 2002), 4 Minutes and 33 Seconds of Uniqueness (Purho 2009), etc. Such games turn the player into an observer, reduce all activity to the task of initial conditions and minimize participation in the game. Idle games encourage the player's desire to not play and offer a limited set of actions – often just one click. A canonical example is Cookie Clicker (Thiennot 2013). Moreover, some idle games work in the "standby" (waiting) mode: the less player enters the game, the more game opportunities will be opened (Alharthi, S. A. et al. 2017).

Nowadays inaction is something that rare person can boast of; we are involved in communication; *our duty is to react*. We deal with the colonization of inaction. If in the previous conditions the possibility of not doing something was a gesture of freedom (Agamben 2010), opposed to the logic of social structure, economy, politics, now it becomes a territory of exploitation. The mechanics of disinvolvement are more in demand than ever, because both exploitation and escape from it are based on them. The situation begins to approach the one that Jorge Luis Borges described in the story "The Lottery in Babylon": the game has already become a part of reality, but with it all sorts of viruses of alienation, exploitation, control, etc. burst into our life. They concern our laziness, powerlessness, inaction. It is worth thinking about creating a philosophical *antivirus* that will preserve them untouched.

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