

Game pleasures and media practices

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Introduction

This paper will explore the concept of media practice related to the social uses of the new technologies of information and communication in everyday life, focusing on a specific cultural form such as videogames. Our proposal is that game experience is embedded in media practices, and that videogame pleasures introduce innovative changes in the way audiovisual products are produced and consumed.

Play and games are relevant subjects of research in anthropology, and videogames are, no doubt, part of media anthropology studies. The few ethnographic accounts that we have reached about videogames from an anthropological perspective have mainly looked at social aspects surrounding the games: community formation, identity, gender and youth lifestyles, especially in online games. We acknowledge these studies, but our idea here is to construct an interdisciplinary wider view and to explore play as a key feature in new media models of consumption. For that purpose, we will try to develop a preliminary theoretical approach that would include pleasure and sensorial issues in media practices understanding.

We depart from two starting points: On one hand, we consider videogames as a cultural form that hybridises audiovisual media culture with game logics. In that respect, we want to especially focus on console and PC games with a strong audiovisual representation component, no matter if the game is played off or online. On the other hand, we understand videogames as a set of practices related with consumption, leisure and peers sociability.

Going further of these two assumptions, we want to develop a working hypothesis that might be useful for future empirical research, which consists in the statement that videogames introduce a “playful” subject position in our relation with audiovisual technologies, transforming the established “spectatorship” relation with audiovisual products to a more active engagement with images. This implies a model of image consumption characterised by a playful production, re-elaboration and remixing practices as a way of appropriating digital audiovisual technologies, which includes practices of sharing domestic and *amateur* content production through the Internet.

An analysis of the subject position (Harre, 1979, 1990) inscribed in audiovisual technologies within a theory of practice framework (Schatzki, 1996) will allow us to examine game pleasures and media uses from an embodied and materially interwoven

practices perspective, useful for a grounded understanding of the so called “new media” context.

From “viewer” to “player”

Videogames can be seen as an intersection of two different logics: narrative representation, characteristic of the audiovisual culture, and the pleasure of play, characteristic of the game culture. Playing videogames can be understood as a sensorial experience that involves media and non-media practices; that is, game experience is embedded within a media practice, transforming precedent forms of audiovisual pleasures.

In this sense, videogames introduce a new relationship between subject and representation that goes far beyond the “spectatorship” position. No more can we think of media consumers merely as “viewers”. Even if we refer to active spectatorship, the act of viewing can’t describe satisfactorily what users do with new media. As an example, we can mention the video remixing practices attached to any popular video clip in sites like *YouTube* (new soundtrack, new edits, subtitles, graphic effects or even new image recordings which end up being sometimes even more valued than the original clip).

Thus, Dan Harries defines “viewsing” as “the experiencing of media in a manner that effectively integrates the activities of both viewing and using [...] ‘Viewers’ are the new ‘connected consumers’ who find entertainment pleasure in the multitasking activities being promoted through their computer and television screens” (Harries, 2002: 172). Although this term can be useful to explain emerging forms of media consumption, it stills makes direct reference to a traditionally defined concept of reception.

We must take into account, as Lana Rakow states, that although research on media uses has to be considered a giant leap forward in the history of media studies, asking questions related to what people do with media as an act of ‘reading’ can’t take us “beyond a model of communication in which institutions speak while citizens listen” (Rakow, 1999: 66).

Media studies have centered their analysis first in the formal aspects of text production and content. Later, theories of reception have examined the way that text is “consumed” and received, focusing on how people appropriate and re-signify the text going further from Frankfurt School that gives little choice to the audience for responding to the hegemonic discourses of institutional apparatuses. New media studies propose to look at current social phenomena such as blogging as a way of empowering people and situate individual discourses at the same level as corporative and State ones. We do not discuss here if this position could be considered as a utopia. The question is that we cannot say any more, as reception theorists sustain, that “the meaning of a text is enacted through practices of reception” (Ginsburg, 2002:6). We should add that cultural meanings are also enacted through practices of remaking, remixing and re-elaboration..., that is to say through practices of production.

From another perspective, P. David Marshall recognizes that it is difficult to find a single metaphor or neologism which can describe the qualities of this new subject position, as

they are not precise enough to identify the spectrum of involvement that is possible with new media. While 'browser' may be considered as an adequate term in order to refer to distracted uses of new media, 'player' becomes particularly relevant as it acknowledges an intensity of experience related to a deep engagement and dedicated use of new media (Marshall, 2004: 26-27).

Videogame as an intersection of pleasures

Videogames situate "play" at the core of the audiovisual experience, introducing innovative changes in the way audiovisual products are consumed and experienced. Thus, the "voyeuristic pleasure" of watching films or TV programs is substituted by an "immersion pleasure" coming from the articulation between audiovisual representation and subject agency and control. In videogames, audiovisual representations must be understood not as a voyeuristic pleasure, a passive exposure to images, but in terms of embodiment and identification. Although we can experience frequently in a videogame "jumping" from a first person view, to a third person view (Murphy, 2004:227), we must highlight that action and embodiment is what differentiates videogames from other media genres. Games represent the most complete symbiosis currently available between human and computer -a fusion of goals, options and perspectives- (Bukatman, 1993:196). This is achieved through the embodiment of the experience of playing, and, therefore, establishing a complex relationship between corporeal experience (the body) and our subjectivity (Lahti, 2001:158).

Following Aarseth, there are other elements which support identification, immersion and participation in videogames; the player character uniqueness, the player representation integrated in the game world, and the player's level of influence, are all crucial in the process of identification and representation in videogames (Aarseth, 1998:6).

We can understand, in a sense, that the proactive production by players of story elements is "a visual-motoric-auditory-decision-making symphony, and a unique real-virtual story that produces a new form of performance art co-produced by players and game designers" (Gee, 2006: 61). In the same vein, Newman (2004:21) follows Carsten Jessen (1995) in his observation that working out -deducing and at the same time overcoming- the rules of a videogame can be its major challenge and fascination. And as Lahti says "this delirium of virtual mobility, sensory feedback and the incorporation of the player into a larger system thus tie the body into a cybernetic loop with the computer, where its affective thrills can spill over into the player's space". (Lahti, 2001:163). In this sense, we can say that videogame pleasure is based on blurring the distinction between the player we become and the character we construct in our play. For this reason we can say also that we experience walking, jumping, flying, shooting, kicking or racing, when we are actually clicking the mouse or tapping the controller (two of the most typical actions we do when playing).

According to Andrew Darley (2000), video games involve 'kinaesthetic performance', which is the primary source of pleasure which they provide. A related pleasure is the vicarious sense of presence in a fictional world.

There is an abundant variety of literature about videogame pleasures that include "any physical, emotional, psychological or ideological sensation". According to Kerr et al (2004), in turning to typologies of pleasure, central to new media pleasures seem to be: control, immersion, performance, intertextuality and narrative. But the authors of *New Media/New Pleasures* also note that the notions of game pleasures have been usually defined in relation to the psychological sensations of the individual user and as the anticipation of, and the enjoyment of, that which is felt to be desirable or gratifying, overpassing the cultural, social, ideological or discursive aspects of pleasure. Game pleasures are considered in the analysis of game pleasures as derived from "inherent" and formal proprieties of videogame structures and design. Thus, cultural, social or ideological aspects are usually seen as "external" factors that impose exogenous directions and restrictions to play pleasures.

In fact, the cybernetic dimension of games is of particular importance to remind us of the tight structure of games and new media systems and, consequently, the limited options and limited worldviews available for players (Marshall, 2004: 69). In the end, as Manovich suggests, the "user is asked to follow the mental trajectory of a new media designer" (Manovich, 2001: 74). But it is equally important to bear in mind that, being rules central to the system, there is a space for negotiation of meanings, as it is made clear by gamer-made alterations, modifications or customisations.

In order to exemplify how the introduction of new practices and new uses of technology in games can act as innovation agents, Sotamma writes about *Machinima*, "computer-generated animations created by utilizing game engines, the software that generates the virtual 3D environment for many popular games. One most popular example is the video-clip *French Democracy*. The author, Alex, is a common video gamer playing with *The Movie*, but he has transformed the contents and rules of the game to include a political view of the French riots in November of 2005.

Play in media practices (Cross-media playful practices)

As we have seen in the Machinima example, we can produce films using game engines, but the adaptation of gaming structures to film narratives is not unusual. We can easily find different ways in which audiovisual media 'remediate' games, as in digital animation, especial visual effects and non-linear narrative structures (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 47-48).

This has something to do with the cross-media logic of the cultural industry. Christy Dena labels as 'transfiction' an approach where a single story *is conceived to be experienced* through different media. That is the case of *The Beast* game, born as a marketing device for the film *Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001), and which required "gamers to traverse websites, work out puzzles, hack code, receive faxes and SMS, find clues in posters, make phone calls and so on." (Dena 2004: 2).

Henry Jenkins explains this kind of industrial strategies as an outcome of the tension and the transition that shapes the current media environment (Jenkins, 2004: 34). In describing what he terms as 'the cultural logic of media convergence', he states that "[c]onvergence is

both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process... Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users. They are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture” (Jenkins, 2004: 37).

Jenkins’ conclusions lead to the inevitability of a negotiation between producers and consumers in different areas, while Marshall visualizes an intricate ‘dance of control and chaos’ where the industries try to contain and service the desires of the ‘audience’ while the audience itself ventures into unserved and uncommercial areas of cultural activity. (Marshall, 2002: 74).

There are more and more media practices imbued by a playful subject position, like we can trace in some videoblogging practices, in fan fiction and the whole of the so-called clip culture –as well as, of course, in game modding practices (see Sotamaa, 2004). As we have mentioned, instead of talking about “reception”, consumption of popular culture should be understood in terms of production but also about the pleasures involved in such practices with media.

As we have pointed out, new media consumption is an active form of social engagement, that implies not only to read and to talk about news, soap operas or films, but also to write and to make public statements through blogging, video production and other forms of media practices that create new contents that are widely spread through the Internet, thus challenging the one way oriented relationship between consumers and producers that has so far characterized mass media cultural diffusion. A case in point is “The bus uncle”, a 6 minute videoclip showing a verbal altercation between two passengers on a Hong Kong bus. It was registered by a third passenger with his mobile phone on April, 2006 and rapidly spread through the web thanks, basically, to *YouTube* site, finally becoming a mass phenomenon in Hong Kong. “New media” can be seen as a new model of cultural production that breaks in multiple ways the cultural circle proposed by Hall and Du Gay (1997) and which can be simplified by the linear process of production, circulation and consumption. Understanding media as social practice allows for looking at what people are doing with media across a whole range of situations and contexts.

We understand media practices in the context of new media theories. With “new media” we don’t necessarily refer to the “newest technologies” nor the “newest media forms”: as some authors like P. David Marshall or Sonia Livingstone point out, new media can be understood as a new context of relation between traditional and emergent media forms, as a new scenario shaped by the convergence between different forms of audiovisual representation with digital and telecommunication technologies. The social and cultural changes that take place in the new media context are shaped by the way people use “media” for such different purposes as communicating with each other, working, voting, dating or playing. This “new media context” allow us to understand media practice from a transformative point of view that breaks down the division between production and consumption of cultural products, the model of emission/reception in communication theory and the spheres of public and private regarding broadcasting contents.

Playful culture?

The videogame, as a *new media* practice, can be seen as an exponent of greater changes not only regarding how media are produced and consumed, but also in the way leisure is organized and in the role of play in our everyday life.

Bart Simon has characterized videogames in terms of intersection between leisure cultures, computer mediated interaction, visual culture and Information Societies (Simon, 2006). Tom Boellstorff has noticed that gaming is increasingly affecting other media, from television to movies to cell phones and Internet. Gaming affects our daily activities including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in new media practices (Boellstorff, 2006:33). To consider videogame as a media practice implies to move beyond the restricted context of videogame consumption (or the practice of playing games) to observe how this practice is related to other practices and how it is socially organized (Couldry, 2003:8)

Schatzki defines “practice” as an array of interwoven actions which include some kind of specialized understanding, explicit rules and teleoaffective structures. He also distinguishes between “integrative” practices, such as farming, cooking or business, that are clearly delimited and integrated in the social order, and “dispersed practices” like following rules, explaining or imagining (1996:91-92). From this perspective, “games” are “integrative” practices and, as other kind of games, video games consumption is related to leisure practices. Their place in the social hierarchy seems to be lower than other more “serious” ones, but as Warde argues, from a consumption perspective, no matter where a practice fits in a hierarchy of social prestige, there are internal goals to be derived from it for individual practitioners (2005:135). So, videogames, as games in general, are socially evaluated as non productive, notwithstanding the amount of money and enterprises they mobilize. And even though its practitioners are engaged into two fundamental social practices: First, they are constructing communities through play, with internal goals and identity values. And secondly, they have a role in the social production and reproduction of symbolic worlds. As Mihai Coman has stated for mass media (2006:19), they are not a simple channel through which cultural symbols circulate, they are part of the very cultural system. Videogames, as traditional games, are cultural forms that generate our sense of what is reality and what is fiction. They are at the centre of the social construction of what is real and non-real.

On the other hand, and still following Schatzki distinction between integrative and dispersed practices, as “play”, videogames contain a “dispersed” practice, which appears in many sectors of social life. Thus, it is worthwhile to try to understand how videogame practices are contributing to the characterisation of new models of subject position in relation to the use of media technologies. And also, to see how this new practices and discourses about them will introduce changes in the way we define the relationship between the represented reality and our imagination.

Understanding the interrelation between media and games and how it shapes current cultural practices represents an open line of research. Practice theory may be useful to approach video gaming, not in isolation but as a set of interconnected practices that transform our way to produce and consume audiovisual representations. In this sense,

videogames are a key cultural form in order to understand how media practices are related to significant social and embodied experiences such as playing and pleasure.

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