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# The Performance of Gameplay: Developing a Ludoliteracy

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It's a bit of a truism, but to the best way to experience and understand a game is to play it. Just as someone who reads a wealth of books is becoming more literate and well read, a person who plays a wealth of games is becoming more ludoliterate and well played. In his book, *Ludoliteracy*, José P. Zagal uses the term to focus a discussion around how to best teach students to better understand games. So developing ludoliteracy is the process of becoming more analytical and insightful about how games work by playing them. The activity of gameplay implicitly connotes an element of performance involved when playing a game. Thinking about this performance of gameplay, I see it happening on three different levels that combine in games and illustrate some of the unique characteristics of the experience.

On one level, the performance of playing a game can be as engaging to watch as it is to play. Granted people have always watched games; whether it's at a sporting event, or at a chess match, or around a coin op arcade cabinet, or at a video game tournament (just to name a few instances). But lately, games seemed to be foregrounding this dynamic even more in the design of the gameplay experience. A great example of this would be the *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* franchises. On a metaphorical level, these games tap into the performative dynamic of playing music and putting on a concert for fans. These games also require that a group of players get together to play, so there is an inherent element of actual performance as well. And it is a lot of fun to watch both the action on the screen and in the room as a group plays through a song. Similarly, it can be entertaining to watch people play games on the Nintendo Wii as well as with the Playstation Move and Xbox Kinect. Both *Dance Central* and *Child of Eden* make good use of the Kinect's ability to turn your body into the controller and really get moving while you play. The embodied nature of these play experiences is fun to perform and to watch others try as well.

In a related vein, the action-adventure game, *Uncharted 2*, has enough of a big blockbuster action story that it's fun to watch the adventure. It's actually a game that my wife enjoyed watching me play, although what was interesting was that she enjoyed it best when I played on the Easy setting. Anything harder caused me to take too long with the various combat sections (where I'd tend to die most often) and she would lose a sense of the thread of the story. But playing on Easy enabled me to advance through combat quickly enough that the story beats kept coming at a pace where she could continue to enjoy watching me navigate the hero through feats of derring-do as the adventure unfolded.

Of course, a large part of the fun of watching someone play a game is to see them do some amazing feat that took skill or luck (or both). Youtube is full of gameplay videos showing some amazing moments of gameplay, and many games are providing in game tools that make it easier than ever to capture video of your gameplay and share it with your friends or the internet at large. Like a highlight reel from a sports game, these gameplay videos illustrate some of the best performances by players.

The idea of performing well leads us to the next level of performance that can be found in games. We've already compared games to sports, but this element of performance is related a little more to theatre. Often, games are compared to film and there are discussions about what characteristics games share (or could borrow) from film. I think it is even more fruitful to look at what games share with, and can learn from, live theatrical performance and improvisational acting. Like theatre, games provide a context (both spatial and conceptual) within which agency is enacted as the players take the stage. As such, performance is an interesting lens to explore the inherent interactivity found in playing games. In both cases, the experience exists primarily in the immediacy of the present moment as players take action. Plus, performance, especially when considered from the perspective of improv, is a great way to think about how coherent experiences can be collaboratively created out of nothing. Like a playwright, game designers can work to create a framework and structure that helps orchestrate a gameplay experience that unfolds across space and time. So players (of a game) can explore and discover the possibility space of a game, which is how they shape their experience with the game.

This leads us to the last level of performance that can be found in games. Fundamentally, games take a lot of practice to both make and master. The design and development of a game is an extremely iterative process that requires lots of testing and tweaking as the development team refines and polishes the game's design. This iterative prototyping is a performative process, as a game goes from blue sky to green light, then to gold to shipped, and then to patched and updated. And when players buy the game, they then have to sit down and master playing it in order to move through the game and (ideally) complete the experience successfully. The challenge and reward cycles of a game can enable a player to advance their skills and get into the flow of playing the game. And then players further develop their gameplaying abilities across all the games that they play.

The act of playing a variety of games helps players become well played as they develop their ludoliteracy and improve their performance as they become expert players who are able to actively engage games and shape their playing experiences. From here, we can start making more in-depth analysis of games, looking at sequences of a game in detail in order to unpack the meaning found in the various components of a game, and illustrate and interpret how it can come together to create a fulfilling gameplay performance. This in turn can help us consider how to design and develop better games. The *Well Played* books and journal that I've been editing are meant to help provide a forum for these types of analytical discussions around gameplay experiences. Games are becoming an increasingly large part of our pop cultural mediascape, and developing a ludoliteracy can help increase not only the quality, but also the variety of games. Games are complex experiences that merit this careful interpretation and insightful analysis as we develop and define a literacy of games as well as a sense of their value as an experience. And this can really only happen by actually playing games and engaging in the performative experience of gameplay.

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