

Broadcast e-sport and videogame technicity

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This paper examines how viewers of e-sport mobilise ‘expert’ styles of play in their own games; with high-level strategies ‘made visible’ (and legible) through e-sport (Taylor, 2012). Within the current literature, this is a point that has been identified in various capacities. Taylor briefly touches on the phenomenological aspects of playing in environments saturated with e-sports, in her compendious work on the subject (2012). Others, while not focusing specifically on e-sport, cite the example of broadcast expertise (and its appropriation by players) as a way in which casting play across various spatial, social or material dimensions contours the phenomenological experience of players (see Jayemanne et al., 2016).

The present work further develops these brief accounts. Borrowing from Bernard Stiegler (and following recent work, such as James Ash’s ontology of videogame interfaces (2015)), this paper adopts the theoretical schema of technicity to characterize and conceptualize the phenomenological experience and outcomes of playing in ‘broadcast saturated’ environments such as the present. For Stiegler, and for the present work, technicity is taken – in short – as the coincidence of human consciousness, agency, or subjectivity, and ‘exteriorized’ technical objects (1998). Stiegler (1998) characterizes certain ‘exteriorized’ technical objects as ‘mnemotechnics’ – which condition the perceptual, mnesic and anticipatory faculties of the human (the technically grounded interplay between these various capacities is representative of the temporal structure of human consciousness. Following Stiegler, Ash situates videogame play as a process operating through various kinds of technicity).

I contend that broadcast e-sport works as a mnemotechnic. In short, the argument is that the ‘projection’ of videogame expertise – via e-sport – triggers a recalibration of how we play videogames, conditioning the experience of their temporal flows via our sense perceptions, subjective memories and anticipations of the future – processes which are embodied in various gestural and cognitive operations in play (see also Ash, 2015).

In making the argument that practices operating at the interstices between playing and watching can thoroughly complicate the phenomenological experiences of playing a videogame, I present findings from an ongoing research project looking at the relationship between the game Dota 2 (Valve, 2013) and its thriving broadcast e-sports scene. This project looks particularly at how players build skill through the invocation of e-sports strategies. This project draws on data from paratextual material (particularly,

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data from gameplay logging platforms used by players) and interviews with player-spectators.

The data I present suggests that while a certain conditioning of perception does occur, the outcomes are not as straightforward as ‘becoming good’ by adopting a ‘better strategy’ (contra existing work). This is framed around Stiegler’s usage of the concept of ‘*pharmakon*’ – which can be synthesized as our fraught experience with technical objects – such as technology, which dually facilitate and debilitate our perceptual, mnemonic or anticipatory capacities (Stiegler, 2010); the conditioning of human consciousness taking on various forms.

The first portion of the data explores how e-sport broadcast provides the conditions for a technicity that places players into more ‘effective’ gaming routines, opening the possibility for higher-tier play. For instance, I look at how ‘everyday’ players productively mobilize the strategies and techniques of high-level players (who showcase their virtuosity to large audiences in tournament play, broadcast via platforms such as Twitch.tv). Drawing particularly on interviews with player-spectators, I discuss how players recalibrate their somatic memory in playing Dota 2, and shift the conditions of anticipation ingame (managing some of play’s contingency, or emergent properties – particularly relevant in a complex game like Dota 2). An example is how e-sport illuminates techniques for rapidly accruing resources in Dota 2 – an important condition for winning games.

In contrast, I also show how this technicity, operating around playing videogames and watching e-sport, can bring about disorientation, or an inability to properly process, anticipate or perceive things ingame. Drawing on interview data (as well as broader sets of logged gameplay, using the Dotabuff platform), I discuss how players ‘ineffectively’ use e-sports strategies. For instance, in the research findings, e-sport worked as a kind of ‘hypomnesia’ (Stiegler, 2010) – the deferral of subjective memory to technical object. An example is where players would strictly follow ‘the metagame’ (an established ‘set’ of strategies, Donaldson, 2015). This oftentimes proved problematic, due to conflicts between the capabilities of e-sports players and viewers, who often tried – but failed – to effectively replicate high-level e-sports strategies (which could be dexterously demanding and beyond their embodied capability. Embodied action is key to videogame experience, as work on e-sport has suggested. See Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012).

Ultimately, this paper argues that broadcast e-sport works as a kind of mnemotechnic that conditions how players engage with videogames. Reporting on findings from a study on Dota 2, this paper provides insights into how cross-media assemblages of videogames and e-sport can complicate the phenomenological experience of play, in numerous ways. Moreover, this paper provides a finer-grained, phenomenological account of how practices like metagaming or playing ‘with’ paratexts operate; that is, a process of deferring, recalibrating, enhancing and diminishing the embodied faculties of the player in negotiating videogames.

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