

Rhythmic Experience and Gameplay

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ABSTRACT

A thread running through recent writing suggests that, similar to music and dance, games are performed rhythms and provide a rhythmic experience. This provides a starting point for a deeper look at what this perspective might reveal about the experience of games. The perception of a rhythm involves patterns of attention that are formed through processes of entrainment and habituation. The body both opens to a rhythm and is bent by it. There are voluntary and involuntary aspects to these processes and this paper explores the possible dynamics of these within game experience. As something that can be performed and perceived, a rhythm also has expressive potential and this relies on the attentional measure formed during entrainment and habituation. Expressive potential is also dependent on the dynamism or agency of the relations between game form and player. These produce the vitality that, it is argued, is essential for the movement of play.

Keywords

games, gameplay, player experience, rhythm, rhythmic experience, entrainment, habituation, expressive potential

INTRODUCTION

This is a paper with an interest in rhythm and, in particular, with an interest in the rhythms of gameplay experience. This interest grew out of an observation from previous research that if play can be defined as “free movement within a more rigid structure”(Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.304) then the quality of the rhythms of that movement lie at the heart of any playful interactive experience (Costello, 2009). There is already tangential support for this focus on rhythm within classic game design practice. For example, rhythm is involved when designers record the levels of tension throughout a game by creating a graph of its dramatic arc (Fullerton, 2008, p.104). Rhythm is also present when a designer charts rising and falling player interest (Schell, 2008, p.253) or fine-tunes the pace of game levels (Davies, 2009). Recently, there has been some more explicit support for a focus on rhythm from games writers who have suggested; that musical notation could be useful for describing game levels (Benson, 2012); that musical instruments and compositions are forms of games (Kanaga, 2012); and that the kinesthetic experience of game play is a kind of music that has its own distinct rhythm (Hamilton, 2011).

Support for a focus on rhythm can also be found in the work of computer game theorists. For example, Apperley has conducted an analysis of the rhythms of game play at cyber cafes (2010); Ash has developed a model of attention where gameplay rhythms are described as helping to create “optimal bandwidth” (2012); and Kirkpatrick has argued

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that gameplay is a form of dance choreographed by the “script” of the game (2011). All this suggests that it could be productive to take a more detailed look at rhythm and at what such a perspective might reveal about the gameplay experience. To speak of the rhythms of game experience is not to speak *only* of the genre of rhythm games or speak *only* of movement, sound and music within games. Rhythm can be found within every game genre and, as this paper will discuss, does not just involve ears and muscles. It involves all of our senses and can be perceived within all aspects of our being in the world (Lefebvre, 2004).

A rhythm is something that both *organizes* events within an experience and is *organized* by the events of that experience (Turetsky, 2004, p.143). It involves the grouping of events and also their distribution in time. In experiencing a rhythm there is an opening as we synchronize to it and a bending as we become habituated to it. The flow of a performed rhythm is also something that can be played with expressively. This paper will focus on these three processes of opening, bending and expressive playing within rhythmic experience and discuss their potential relationship to game experience. The separation out of these aspects of rhythm is only done to aid the investigation: for within the flow of rhythmic experience the three processes not only often operate simultaneously but also rely on each other for their operation. Separating these out, however, allows consideration of the rhythmic dynamics of the relations between game form and game player. It will allow us to ask, who is doing the opening and who is providing the rhythm that is being opened to? To ask, who is being bent and who is bending them? And to consider, who is able to play with the rhythm and where does the expressive potential for playing with a rhythm lie - in the game, in the player or in both of them.

Perhaps not surprisingly the movement of rhythm will allow us to see some fluidity within the available positions of the player and game form. The discussion will rely on metaphors as a way to think about rhythmic processes and provide space for imagination. These metaphors emphasize that rhythmic practice is performed across a continuum of voluntary and involuntary attention; that it can be a form of possession or contamination but also entrancement and enlargement; that it can involve manipulation and compulsion but also be a way of thinking or learning. Rhythmic experience, it will be argued, relies on the repetition of past habits but lives in the spontaneous difference of the moment of performance. Within the dynamism of rhythm lies the potential for the creative play of subversion and improvisation. Rhythm both has vitality and produces vitality. And that production of vitality is, I believe, key for the creation of interesting game experiences.

BIO

Dr. Brigid Costello lectures in media production in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, Australia. Her research focuses on the experience of play and on practice-based strategies for designing for play. Her general research interests include interaction design, user experience, serious games, game design and play experiences within interactive art.

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