

Broadcasting Play: Articulating Roles of Materialities and Bodies

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INTRODUCTION

In the study of videogames, the location of play as an experience influenced by a broader field of material and bodily relations has been a popular and generative perspective. Through the appropriation of a range of theoretical rubrics, ranging from cybernetics, to Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005), scholars have situated materialities and players as central stakeholders in the experience of play.

In this paper, I argue that the practice of broadcasting play, through platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, have come to represent an important, public framing of play as a thoroughly networked experience. From 'Let's plays' to livestreams, broadcast play often features relatively candid footage of the body in motion, and its interactions with hardware and software alike. I note, however, that some streams take steps in marginalising representations of their bodily interaction or surrounding materialities; arguably shifting focus, instead, to the content of the game being broadcast and displays of (generally) facial affect by broadcaster. This paper explores how different formats of broadcast communicate varying ontologies of videogame play; situating networks of material (and immaterial) relations. In what ways do particular methods of framing play, via broadcast, orient, or disorient, viewers from the idea of play as an experience thoroughly mediated by materialities and bodies?

LOW FIDELITY, HIGH IMPORTANCE

One such site of importance, in articulating play as an experience mediated by *physical* networks is that of the 'low fidelity' broadcast. These broadcasts could involve the use of webcams, camcorders, or camera phones, in order to document videogame play (essentially, pointing the camera at the screen to record play). In doing so, these broadcasts would generally frame important material constituents of play, such as the television set and console. While the method was crude, and the audiovisual quality poor, these broadcasts, I contend, function as signifiers of videogames' materiality.

HIGH FIDELITY BROADCAST: AFFORDANCES AND LIMITATIONS

The proliferation of more advanced broadcast technologies and methods have generally made obsolete approaches, such as those documented above. This has given rise to new approaches to broadcast, as well as generated tensions in representations of materialities and bodies.

One popular approach in contemporary broadcast is the use of a camera inlay. This has been utilised to great effect, by a number of streaming communities, in order to document both material and bodily interface with games. For instance, the streaming community in rhythm game *osu!* (2007) will often document hand movement via a webcam, oriented toward the player's hand. High level players not only showcase their virtuosity of the game via the accumulation of points onscreen, but through the ways in which their body has been trained to respond to the game. Popular eSports, have also implemented such features. These examples have been depicted in Figure I; two screenshots from these respective representations of interaction. Both screenshots also highlight the devices through which the game is controlled; tablets, monitors and keyboards. In both examples, hardware is particular and given focus due to a perceived importance (*osu!* user is showing viewers a custom hardware layout, while the eSport example is grounded in a desire to sell hardware through professional player endorsement). Regardless of rationale, this kind of broadcast forces into consideration interactions between humans, software and machines in play.

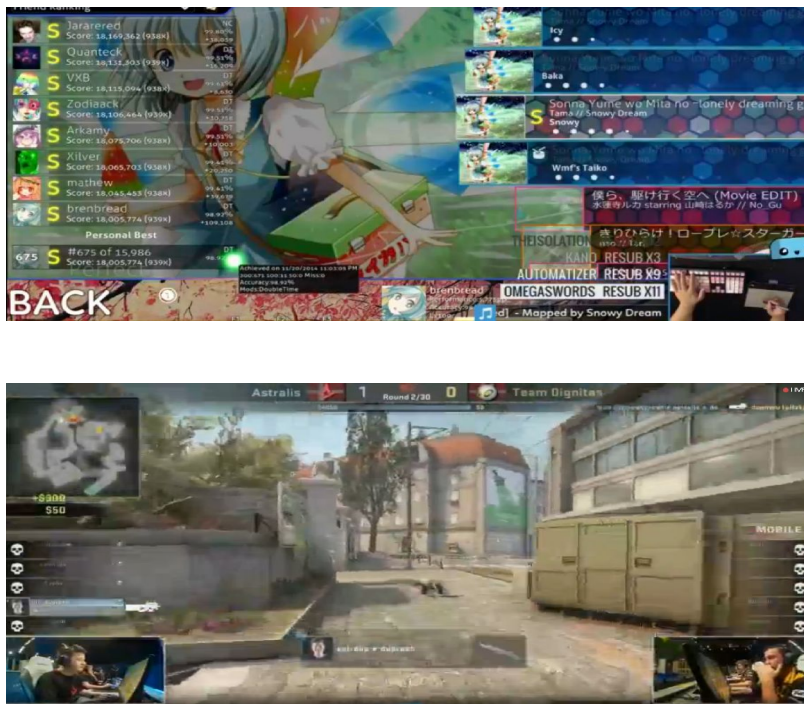


Figure I. Screenshot from *osu!* stream (Top) and Counter Strike: GO stream (Bottom)

While the augmentation of footage, showing both the game and the player's bodily engagement, has proven useful in highlighting the networks of materialities and bodies that comprise play, applications

have not always been this fruitful. Particular instances of framing the body and the material (or lack thereof) just as readily highlight tensions between thinking about play as networked and play as an abstracted phenomenon.

Using the camera inlay, many popular Twitch streamers locate their upper body (head, chest) in the frame. As such, viewers are unable to view any haptic interactions with the controller. While the body is in frame it isn't depicted as functionally engaged the direction of play. Onscreen action is, essentially, abstracted from any from any kind of enabling agent(s). Instead, we bear generally bear witness to ways in which the body is acted *upon* and triggered by the game, through largely facial, vocal or gestural responses to prompts (certainly, mapping out facial affect in the realm of 'Let's Play' broadcasters could be interesting). Figure II highlights an example of a Twitch streamer deploying this broadcast method.



Figure II. Screenshot of popular body framing; head and torso in frame.

IMMATERIAL MATERIALITIES

Until this point, I have focused principally on ways in which broadcast play orients viewers toward the field of *physical* relations facilitating play. However, as emerging disciplines of software studies would tell us, algorithmic anatomies of software also function as important materialities; meaningful and enabling user practice (Berry 2011). Streams detailing algorithmically situated activities, such as modding and tinkering with games, articulate code's importance as an enabling materiality, while simultaneously moving away from ideas of the software as an incomprehensible 'black box' (reminiscent of ideas put forward by Friedrich Kittler, particularly those regarding the "systems of secrecy" [1997, 151] and notions of the unknowable apparatus).

CONCLUSION

The idea that play represents a state of negotiation between bodies and materialities is by no means a novel idea. I argue, however, that channels of broadcast play have, in some instances, come to represent important public articulations of these ideas; orienting viewers toward holistic ways of thinking about games. They also highlight dialectical tensions, through broadcast that takes steps to efface material and bodily constituents of play, and the agency of these actors.

BIO

Ben Egliston is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. He is currently researching the ways in which players learn and develop an understanding of videogames, and how this has shifted dramatically in the age of livestreaming. One area of interest inquiry has been how players develop 'surrogate' gaming literacies through broadcast channels such as Twitch and YouTube.

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