Challenging our Ideologies of Play: How Performance in Games Can Help us Interrogate our Rituals of Play

Duncan Corrigan

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
Melbourne, Australia
duncancorrigandesign@gmail.com

Keywords

Transformative Experience, Ideologies of Play, Experimental Game Design, Performing in Games, Introspection

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream video game marketplace, among other entertainment marketplaces, perpetuates an ideological concept of play that is necessarily commodified. Boluk and LeMieux write in their book *Metagaming* (Boluk and LeMieux, 2022) "[Video games] fetishization as commodities obfuscates the practice of play." (2022, 9) In this spirit, play is commonly talked about in relation to, and attributed to commodified artefacts. This obscures the fact that people are playful, not artefacts, and it's by the manner in which we engage rather than that which we interact with that constitutes play. That is to say the practice of play is a manner of engaging with the world around us and is not limited to or brought about by certain artefacts. Through the development of a video game titled *Moving On*, this research explores potential avenues to growing awareness of our human capacity to play beyond traditional play structures to untie our rituals from capital-driven agendas and engage playfully more often and in more places.

Screenshot from Moving On

Embodying or performing the role of a character in a video game presents the player opportunities to express themselves and extend meaning through an internal lens. However, performance in games perhaps presents players an additional benefit in the facilitation of a deeper understanding of their ability to play outside of traditional play

structures. This research reveals this potential of performance in games through an approach to game design that de-emphasises the significance of the artefact, rejecting ideological concepts of play derived from the pervasiveness of commodified forms of entertainment.

To explore performance in games, I employ a practice-based approach (Candy and Edmonds, 2018), drawing on experimental game design frameworks to frame the driving design sensibilities behind the resulting video game. *Metagaming* is one such framework that places the role of video game artefacts as tools or instruments that people play games with, in, on and around. A similar approach is observed in the New Games Movement which delineates the function of games as a collection of rules, and play as the manner in which we choose to respond to those rules. *The Well-Played Game* (Bernard De Koven, 2013) expands on these early concepts, pointing to our capacity to consciously reshape the outcomes of a game by changing how we are responding to its rules. Lastly, Tracey Fulerton's Slow Play (Fullerton, 2018) concepts interrogate the notion that our entire experience of video games is encompassed in the artefact, instead using games as a means to nurture a more internal experience through an intentionally slower pace. In accordance with the design frameworks above, the design sensibilities driving the game focus on developing open-ended and expressive interactions leaving room for players to find their own play. In addition, the game seeks to remove traditional play structures to de-emphasise the role of the game in the players' practice of play. Lastly, the game employs a slow pace to invite reflection and allows players to see themselves in play.

Moving On features a layered animation system which allows actions to be combined to create various expressions of movement and interaction. This empowers players to embody and perform the playful traits of a child in a manner which seeks to imbue actions with meaning beyond the structure of the game. *Moving On* has no objectives or active way to progress the game. This decision is rooted in an effort to de-emphasise the artefact to facilitate a growing sense within the player that they can find meaningful experience without the need for conventional structures. This greater onus on players to find their own fun is intended friction which aims to provoke introspection. *Moving On'*s setting, stage-like framing, rich soundscapes and atmospheric effects aim to evoke a sense of physicality and sentimentality, inviting players to slow the pace of their interactions in an effort to soak in the stillness.

Various in-game camera angles from Moving On

Moving On presents a case for performance in games as a way to encourage the challenging of established ideologies of play. As the field and industry of games expands there is room to explore their cultural and personal impact on our ideas around play, and by extension, our rituals around play. This is perhaps increasingly prudent as the game industry's cultural reach is predominately in the way of mainstream commercial products. Additionally, there appear to be many challenges in validating subjective player experience and verifying the impact of game design sensibilities that prevents more definitive conclusions. However, *Moving On* may still serve as a demonstration to other games practitioners of the potential for challenging the mediums conventions, as part of a greater acknowledgement of the

mediums pervasive influence on cultural norms of play.

BIO
Duncan is an artist and experimental game designer with an interest in exploring what it means to play and how we inspire playfulness in each other.

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