

Engaging Fields of Play:

Considerations of Player Physicality in e-sports

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OUTLINE

QUESTIONS This poster takes up two main areas of contention which commonly arise in considerations of e-sports as sports:

- 1. *HOW* does player physicality manifest in e-sports, and
- 2. *HOW* does the relationship between human performance with a “performance enhancing” technology play out in e-sports?

These two questions are described with an emphasis on:

- * Human Movement
- * Balance
- * Haptic engagement
- * The sensuousness of bodies and technologies

METHOD

Qualitative research method - focused on three specific e-sports sites, the technologies used and the player practices:

Counter-Strike: Semi-structured interviews (players, organizers); observation of two e-sports LANs (in CS:Source & CS 1.6).

WoW Raiding: Ethnography with raiding guild; interviews with world first raiders; Observations of LIVE raiding; guild blogs and player interviews available online (journalistic and personal).

WoW Arena (preliminary work): Observation of LAN tournaments (live and streamed online); guild blogs and available player interviews (journalistic and personal).

KEY AREAS

Sports Phenomenology/Philosophy - Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Osterhoudt, 1973.
Materiality of Play - Taylor, forthcoming; Sports and Technologies - Butryn, 2002; Lahti, 2003.
E-sports - Rambusch, Jakobsson, and Pargman, 2007; Taylor, forthcoming; Lowood 2010.
Space and Movement - Ingold, 2000.



I. MOVEMENT

Counter-Strike players are prime examples of seeing whilst moving, as they manoeuvre their characters across the terrain and react to the space and the other players playing within it. With the game’s short time limit for each round (a typical round of an e-sports match in CS lasts around one minute and forty-five seconds); these movements become performances of skill, of habitual practice, that are necessary to reach the desired goal — a win. In the game, sound and sight draw the action and show the players how to perform; in this respect we might draw on social anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2000) work on perception of the environment, he notes that “[a]s we travel from one place to another, we pass through a sequence of images, each of which is specific to – and in turn permits us to identify – a particular location along the way” (p.224). Following Ingold’s description, I would argue that

“We know *as* we go, not *before* we go”

Ingold 2000:230

e-sports involve players in a constant process of moving and meaning making. With each move an *Arena* player makes, the opponents (and indeed team-mates) are seeing and reacting to the changing landscape (images and momentary locations) in which every movement is crucial to the end-game state; in team games a further dimension of *inter-corporeality* plays into the meaning making of the ever-changing environment (Hockey et.al., 2007). In his work on the philosophy of sport, Robert Osterhoudt (1973) finds that it is the manner in which movements are performed which is most significant in grasping the physicality of sporting movement. He explains that chess, for example, does not engage the body in sporting movement as the kinaesthetic movement of any piece from A to B has *no effect on the outcome of that movement*. Where—as the many movement decisions made in getting to bomb site A to bomb site B in CS has everything to do with the outcome of each in-play moment. Wright et.al’s work on CS from 2002 also highlights this key part of the game-play, noting that “[p]laying is not simply mindless movement through a virtual landscape, but rather movement with a reflexive awareness of the game’s features. . . .”. Unrepeatable performances are made in e-sports matches through micro body movements made on each featured field of play (Lowood, 2010; Reeves et.al 2009); in these sites of e-sports (CS; Arena; Raiding), the (sports) body performance of each player and their micro movements are central to the outcome of every match.



Map overview of CS players engaged in “sporting movement”

2. BALANCE

Balance is represented in the physical body choices that are made in order to execute a desired on-screen action,

From field notes: *At the LAN party DreamHack, the CS player in front of me holds his body tight as he flicks the mouse, left and right, to scan the landscape for any impending opposition, the player next to him turns his character backwards to run up a ramp in order to target any snipers from above and behind, comfortably navigating the complex on-screen movement.*

Neither of these players falls into the screen or mimics the movements of their characters, nor do they express any queasiness from the movement, which are just some of the recognizable effects of moving in the FPS environment for many new players (Lahti, 2003; Swalwell, 2008). Their physical body choices are established by not falling into these unfastened movements — with a straight back, shoulders’ inclined forward, their energy is focused into the modulations of their poised hands and fingers. Balance refers to more than what we sight the body engaged in; it is also the balance of all internal, here I focus on *composure*. *Composure* in e-sports is reflected through the performance of high-performance Arena player *OrangeMarmelade* (OM) in a one against two player situation in a major e-sports final. When 3 vs. 3 Arena teams are depleted to one against two, the win almost always goes to the team with the numbers on their side. Though, in this particular gaming moment, OM – the lone standing player (with very little health left) playing in front of a large crowd and playing for a substantial purse – is the epitome of composure under pressure. Within a matter of seconds, he seems to control the two opposing players with his actions and movements, dealing devastating and timely spell (damage) after spell until the first, then second opponent goes down. Whilst I do not have the space to go into the play in detail, the main points of OM’s composure rest on his maintained clarity of movement in the terrain (which was vital for the win), combined with his cool-headed delivery of offensive/defensive moves to overcome two players at once. Imagine yourself in a familiar underdog situation; in a game of basketball, your team is behind by one point and you steal the ball with three seconds left to score in the championship game – the outcome relying on your training to manage this moment; or perhaps you can recall the senses that were aroused after laying the bomb in your first game of Counter-Strike, where you quickly switch to a defensive stance, not knowing where to look or turn, and hoping that your team-mates have you covered. That player in that moment (where every second stretches out an eternity) is under extreme pressure comprising of adrenalin and the psychological battle of how to tackle the moving performance. As Hans Gumbrecht puts it, “...*composure in the face of gestures of destruction is the highpoint of the [sports] production ... those who give in to mental anguish do not make it to the top of their sport*” (2006:164–166). Other extreme layers of composure (in sports) seen in efforts such as Kerri Strug’s Olympic Gold securing vault on a severely injured ankle push the centrality of the tacitly labouring body. Strug’s balance (pounding up the floor and landing on a tender limb – an unpractised exercise) and ability to “keep it together” are part and parcel of her performance and what make her vault so memorable as an extreme moment of the athlete in control. Going back to OM’s delivery, his demonstration (whilst less “extreme”) captures the labour of a body engaged in a high performance sport, where the composition of movement, balance, practice, and delivery is brought together in a stunning performance that left the Arena playing community literally in awe of this skilful manifestation of sporting prowess. Kerri Strug and OM also demonstrate in their performances the sensory understanding they have with their materials of play – the feel of the materials in hand; the haptic engagement of the sporting body.



3. HAPTIC ENGAGEMENT

The engagement with our virtual experiences and handled actions — from finger’s tapping to the steadiness of bodies watching the display, the virtual environment and the equipment in use is a part of the symbiotic physical engagement of the game with the player (Hockey et.al., 2007; Lahti, 2003). The importance of the touched material used in play becomes obvious when we see the backpacks of the participants; when not at play, players carry around their own personal keyboard and mouse – non-official technology allowed in tournament play (Taylor, forthcoming). The feel of these technologies is personalised, like the footwear of an (un-sponsored) basketball team — each piece of equipment chosen for the fit and feel, tailored to the individual player to enable an uninhibited performance. Players who use technology to extend their performances have an intimate feel for the technologies that lie under their hands when at play. At LAN tournaments, the space of the table (that each player is allotted) can vary; at the e-sports tournament *The eXperience*, the table space could bear a player’s keyboard, mouse-pad, mouse, and very little else. Whilst watching a team set-up for a match, one player frantically consulted his team-mate on what to do as his mouse-pad didn’t fit the allotted space – it ridged over onto the next table causing a visible divot in the mouse-pad, posing a certain problem for the fluidity of his

“Sportspeople thus touch, and are in turn touched by the physical properties of terrain and equipment, and so build a two-way, embodied relationship with them” Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007:123

would be drastically changed (perhaps even unrecognizable) on the circumstance of a potholed mouse-pad. Whilst a team manager might preach that it’s a part of the game, and “great” player’s overcome such trivialities (Kane, 2008), it is nevertheless a point towards the importance of the tools and space that players manoeuvre with, and the intimate body knowledge that is developed with, or as a part of, these tools. As Anne Balsamo (1996) has noted, the “*machines assume organic functions and the body is materially redesigned through the application of newly developed technologies*” (in Lahti 2003: 158); in e-sports we are engaged in a sensuous habitat when we are playing in, on, with, and as technologies – both new and old.



Sensuous performance sites



4. SENSUOUSNESS OF BODIES & TECHNOLOGIES

The *raiding* player puts “on” their prostheses (also called *extensions* or *complexifications* in Gumbrecht’s terms) — the additional parts that enable them to extend into in the desired action (networked gaming), including “plugging in” the connection cable, the mouse, the head-set, downloading the latest add-on, logging into Ventrillo etc. — when the game or practice sessions take place. As one example, the mouse as a prosthetic is a touched body tool — extending the body as an *implemented* piece of equipment (Balsamo in Lahti, 2003), yet also acting as a *self technology* (what Ted Butryn calls the physical and psychologically altering technologies that reshape the body) as the manipulation of the mouse is developed over time through training and immersion in the landscape where the mouse interfaces play (Hockey et.al., 2007; Butryn, 2002). This connection is described by Lahti as a “prosthetic memory”, where timing and movements with the prostheses are internalized in order to survive the game. Hans Gumbrecht offers an analogy of shooting to this notion of the game materials as prosthetics. The sport of shooting, he explains, offers a *tool to extend an action we are already capable of* – in this case the function of hitting a target (ibid:177). Gumbrecht points to the sensuous engagement that players/sportspersons have with these technologies (such as the firearm), and more so the embodied understanding of how such a tool works in conjunction with the game, i.e. in traditional sports, the bi-athlete composing her breathing before manipulating the tool that extends her desired action or, in e-sports, the raiding player adjusting their tools, remembering how to manipulate the terrain with the equipment at hand and recalling correct timing and movements, as well as checking their connection before for yet another run on a boss. This moment of using the tool(s), or better put, of remembering the prosthetic(s) is a sensuous one. Using Laurence de Garis’ (1999) terminology, the *sensuousness* of the sporting moment is one that is touched. Whilst de Garis talks of the inter-corporeality between professional wrestlers knowing how to move in the ring through subtle clues in touched bodies, I use his notion to think about the sensuousness of player and prosthetics. As a former basketball player, I still have the memory of my ankle braces; how the tape should feel when wrapped on my thumbs; the fit of a good pair of shoes when tied up well (and the memory of my most hated “sponsor” shoes which needed constant adjustment to avoid blisters); the stretched control of my arms, shoulders and chest when lowering the bench press bar; the carry of the ball – adjusting my dribble, passes, and shot to its feel (too hard, too soft or just right). Whilst Gumbrecht points to the singular tool of play extending our body actions, I would highlight the multiple and extensive tools at play (and in pre-play/practice) that require sensuous engagement with for play to materialize “just so”, especially so for high-performance play (Taylor, 2006; Lowood, 2009). In these sites of e-sports, multiple technologies are always already a part of the players’ movement (Susi and Rambusch, 2007). The tools – the technologies the prosthetics – are part and parcel of body performances in e-sports.