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Spectating games can be a form of gameplay

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Abstract: Watching other people play videogames —a.k.a. 'spectator gaming'— is a widespread practice. Yet, it is considered by some as an inadequate form of engagement with games. In this paper, I show that the strongest objection to spectator gaming relies on the claim that some properties of videogames are better, if not exclusively, accessible to the player. After that, I propose two replies to this challenge. The first is that 'secondary players', i.e., individuals who indirectly take part in the game, can access the relevant properties. The second reply is that even paradigmatic spectators may engage in simulated play, and therefore, access these properties as well.

When I talk to friends about my longstanding interest in videogame streams and Let's Plays, some of them ask: 'Why on earth would you want to *watch* someone else play a videogame?'. The worry underlying that reaction, I think, is something like this: when spectating videogames, people miss out on what these works were designed to offer, namely, a first-hand gameplay experience. Spectator gaming would therefore be a wrong or suboptimal type of engagement with videogames. That's why the question 'why would you *watch* someone play?' is generally followed by another: 'why not *play* yourself?'

Implicit in the previous objection is the assumption that videogame spectators are never *playing* in any kind of way. My goal in this paper is to challenge that assumption. I shall argue that videogame spectators can be actually engaged in a form of play, and thus, engage with the game in a manner fitting their nature. In section 1,

I specify how the challenge to spectator gaming should adequately be expressed and understood. In section 2, I show why 'tandem play' and 'secondary players' provide a first objection to this challenge. This leads me, in section 3, to consider the role of spectators who engage in 'simulated play', providing another argument against the initial challenge.

1. The worry with spectator gaming

In a videogame, what is represented on screen depends at least in part on the players' actions and choices. Pending your input, Mario won't jump or run or do anything. This is just to say that games have the characteristic feature of being *interactive*.

In non-interactive works, by contrast, the fictional content is out of the appreciators' reach, having been set prior to their engagement with the work. No matter how many times you read *Anna Karenina*, the story will remain the same, and fictional events won't change across readers. This distinction between interactive and non-interactive works translates into different roles for their appreciators. As Espen Aarseth puts it:

> Like a passenger on a train, [the appreciator of non-interactive fictions] can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency break and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence; 'let's see what happens when I do this'. The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. (1997, p. 4)

Where the spectator attends to an unfolding plot, the player actively takes part in the game's fiction or narrative. This translates into very different experiences. The player, insofar as she strives for victory and struggles against failure or misplay, is

engaged in instrumental and goal-oriented thinking. The spectator of traditional fictions does no such thing, being mostly absorbed in interpretation or aesthetic contemplation.

The interactivity of games is also responsible for much of their attraction. When playing, *you* get to decide what to do and where to go next, how to level up your character, and so on. The interactivity of games means that achievements and failures are yours. So is the journey. But when you spectate a videogame on YouTube or Twitch, there's none of that. Since you don't hold the controller, you can't choose what to do or where to go next. Achievements and failures are not yours but someone else's. Nor is the journey. So why care?

Something like this, I think, explains why some people are puzzled by videogame streams. If the point and pleasure of gaming lie in a first-person interaction with the work, it seems that spectating, by removing interactivity from the picture, leads to an improper kind of appreciation. Nathan Wildman (2022) expresses this objection as follows: 'because games are interactive, proper appreciation requires *playing* them. If you're just watching someone else play the game, you're not engaging with it in the right way'. On this view, although spectating videogames may be entertaining or valuable, it remains an inadequate form of engagement.

There are several issues with this way of framing the anti-spectator challenge, however.

First, it is by no means obvious that 'proper appreciation of videogames requires playing them'. Being focused on the task at hand, gamers cannot pause to spectate their own performance. For this reason, they aren't always in the best position to grasp all the qualities of the videogame that they are playing. In the midst of a frantic *kaizo* level, you simply can't attend, on pain of certain death, to the beauty of the textures or the cleverness of the level design. The spectator, being detached from the demands of immediate action, can focus their attention where they please, while the player needs to distribute it onto game-relevant aspects. As such, spectators arguably have a better access to some aspects of the videogame being played.

Second, the fact that videogames are primarily designed for playing does not imply that they are designed *only* to that end, so that spectatorship would be a contingent aspect of videogames. Some argue that spectatorship is an essential component of sport (Mumford, 2021, p. 76). A similar point may hold for videogames, since they are also increasingly designed to be watched. With the rise of online multiplayer gaming, e-sports, and streaming, game developers have found a new marketing channel for their products. To sell well, videogames need to be fun to play, but also, fun to watch. And just like mass spectatorship has transformed the way sports are played (Mumford, 2012, p. 46-47), so did it affect the design of videogames. This is why many games now include 'spectator modes', 'replay' functions, or 'highlights' sequences (such as the 'Play of the Game' cam in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*). In light of this, it seems difficult to maintain that spectating games would be an inappropriate kind of engagement. Many videogames, while surely made to be played, are also designed to be watched.

Lastly, there seems to be a wrong inference in the initial objection. From the observation that the interactivity of videogames is what makes them enjoyable or valuable, and that spectators do not interact themselves with the game, we cannot conclude that they do not get to experience the game's interactivity. Indeed, you don't need to interact yourself with an interactive work to experience its interactivity. Just like you don't need to be on the field to appreciate the qualities of a soccer game, you need not have a controller in your hands to appreciate the interactive qualities of videogames.

The initial challenge to spectator gaming seems unpersuasive, then. However, there's another, and I think stronger, way to frame it. According to Thi Nguyen (2020), games are the art of agency: game designers shape modes of agency that players come to temporarily inhabit when they play. This view can motivate an objection to spectator gaming. If videogames let players take on alternate and sculpted forms of agencies, as Nguyen claims, and if spectators cannot inhabit or access these agencies in the way that players do, it follows that videogame spectators miss something

compared to players. And what they miss, Nguyen adds, is an essential dimension of games, viz. the agential qualities that gives them their distinctive artistic interest and value.

Why think that players have a privileged access to certain qualities or aspects of games? Nguyen supports this claim as follows:

> … the player of a game is not simply the spectator with the best seat in the house. The player has a special relationship to the activity of play. They have a direct experience of their own action and agency. There are special aesthetic qualities that are available primarily to the player themselves—aesthetic qualities that arise in the act of analyzing, deciding, seeing, responding, and doing. (2020, p. 107)

The particular aesthetic qualities Nguyen talks about are experienced by players in the first person and tied to their agency. They are not about *seeing* someone act a certain way, but relate to the process of *acting* that way: '[players] have access not only to the aesthetics of the Chess move itself, but also to the aesthetics of the process of generating that move. They can have a special experience of their action as *practically harmonious*' (2020, p. 107).

Nguyen proceeds to describe several forms of this practical harmony (2020, p. 107-112). One is the 'harmony of solution'. This is the harmony felt between an obstacle and its solution, which is experienced, for instance, when the different parts of a puzzle in a level come together. Another is the 'harmony of action'. An example would be a perfectly timed dodge during a boss fight in *Dark Souls*. There, you don't merely experience the fit between a solution and a gameplay challenge. Instead, you experience 'the fit between the obstacle and yourself as the originator of those solutions' (2020, p. 108). Last is what Nguyen calls the 'harmony of capacity', where the agent experiences a fit between the task at hand and their abilities pushed to their limit. Think of those moments in *Tetris* when you barely make it: tetrominoes are almost reaching the top of the screen, but you still manage to complete a line at the

very last second. The harmony of capacity lets you experience an adequacy between the whole of your abilities, worked at their maximum, and the game's challenge.

Crucially, Nguyen thinks that these types of practical harmony are not all available, or at any rate not to the same degree, to players and spectators. The harmony of solution is available to both, insofar as it 'makes no explicit reference to the actor or their capacities' (2020, p. 108). But the harmony of action, though accessible in theory to both to player and spectator, would be better experienced by the former (2020, p. 108). Because this type of harmony centrally involves the experience that an agent has of their own agency, it can only be grasped dimly or derivatively from a third-person perspective. The harmony of capacity, for Nguyen, is also essentially a privilege of the players. After all, it involves a sense of *their* own abilities and limitations, which is not always easy to grasp from a spectator point of view. This is especially the case in strategy and mental games, where said abilities and limitations are not outwardly displayed (2020, p. 110).

To sum up, Nguyen claims that games have aesthetic or agential qualities which are better, if not exclusively, grasped from the player's perspective. Provided that such qualities are essential to the understanding and experience of games as an artform (as he goes on to argue), this claim builds a strong foundation for a criticism of spectator gaming. On this account, spectators miss something important about games; namely a set of qualities to which players would have a privileged access.

My goal, here, will be to answer this challenge to spectator gaming, i.e. to deny that the agential qualities of all videogames are better, if not exclusively, accessible to the player. Note that this is compatible with accepting that the agential qualities of *some* videogames are better grasped by players. Indeed, and for reasons detailed later on, the latter claim seems true in the case of highly "kinesthetic" and fast-paced videogames, whose gameplay primarily demands motor skills. To answer the anti-spectator challenge, however, is it enough to establish that there are *some* videogames in which the relevant agential qualities are available not only to the players, but also

to spectators. This is what I intend to show in the rest of this paper, by offering two distinct arguments to that conclusion.[1]

2. Tandem play and secondary players

In videogames, there's generally no doubt as to who's playing and who's not. Intuitively, the player is simply the person holding the controller (or joystick, mouse, etc.), whereas spectators are those who do not exert any control over the relevant input devices. This natural way of drawing the line between players and spectators, however, is at odds with a common gaming practice, that Consalvo *et al*. (2016) call 'tandem play'. In tandem play, people gather to 'play together' a *single-player* videogame: one person holds the controller, while the others around give instructions and advice, look up strategies, comment on the ongoing game, with occasional banter.

Is tandem play just another form of spectatorship? My contention is rather that the person holding the controller, in such cases, is not the *only one* playing. The other people involved, insofar as they can influence the course of the game, are engaged in an activity of (collective) play. In this, I follow James Newman (2002), who coined the notion of 'secondary player' to refer to that peculiar role. As he explains:

> Even ostensibly single-player games like *Tomb Raider* are often played by 'teams'—with the primary-player performing the traditional task of control while others (secondary players) interested, engaged with the action, but not actually exerting direct control through the interface, perform tasks like map-reading, puzzle-solving and looking out for all the things that the principal player doesn't have time for. (2002, p. 3-4)

[1]There may well be other arguments to the same conclusion. For instance, and as an anonymous reviewer points out, some videogames (e.g. "walking simulators" or visual novels) require very little action from the player, who mostly attends passively to a narrative. The player does so little in these games that there seems to be few important agential qualities to experience. As such, one could claim that a spectator wouldn't miss out on any agential qualities there (or that even they did, it wouldn't matter much).

The role of secondary player has counterparts beyond videogames, most notably in sports. Think of copilots in rally car-racing. Although they do not hold the wheel, they play a crucial role of support and assistance to the driver, and can therefore have a decisive impact on the outcome of the race. This is why they are correctly seen as participants in the race, by contrast with ordinary spectators on the side of the road. Secondary players are just like copilots: although they take part in the game in a more indirect (and sometimes limited) fashion, they have an influence on its course and outcome, and they are recognized in that role by the primary players. As such, they are aptly considered as active participants in the game.

While secondary players have been part of the videogame culture since its early days, the phenomenon has recently taken unexpected proportions with live streaming platforms such as Twitch. There, viewers may communicate with the streamer and between themselves via a synchronous text chat window. Interestingly, streamers sometimes ask viewers what should be their next move, before following a suggestion offered to them. When this happens, viewers become secondary players: they — individually or collectively— have an influence of the course of the game.[2]

Thus, videogame spectators often assume the role of secondary players. By doing so, they engage in a form of play. Now, the important question is this: can secondary players experience the several types of practical harmony that Nguyen talks about? The answer is obviously positive in the case of the harmony of solution. You don't need to be a player (whether primary or secondary) to experience the adequacy between a gameplay problem and its solution.

What about the harmony of action? I see no reason why secondary players couldn't experience it too, and in fact, experience it just as robustly as primary players.

[2] Some might worry that the line between secondary players and 'pure' spectators is quite blurry. Certainly, there's some vagueness and room for disagreement here. My goal here, however, isn't to provide a theory of what it takes to qualify as a secondary player. I rather want to show why engagement with videogames is better thought in terms of a continuum with more or less active participants, rather than in terms of a sharp divide between purely passive spectator and active primary players.

Although they do not hold the controller, secondary players involve their agency in the task at hand. They too are engaged in instrumental and goal-directed thinking, in decision making, and in action generation. When I help the primary player navigate a level, defeat a boss, or figure out a puzzle, I may experience a fit between the game's challenges and my own agency, even if I'm not the one pressing buttons. True, my agency is mediated by another, and is therefore somewhat restrained. But this does not prevent me from experiencing its (in)adequacy to the demands of gameplay.

Moreover, secondary players can experience the harmony of a particular move *as generated collectively* by themselves and the primary player. Many years ago, I played *Baldur's Gate II* with a friend. He was controlling the mouse and keyboard, while I was sitting by his side. In the sewers of Amn, we encountered a creature which seemed immune to damage. After many unsuccessful attempts, we agreed that we should try and heal it to see what would happen. In fact, this was exactly what we were supposed to do in order to defeat the monster. Here, we did not only experience the harmony of solution, i.e., the fit between a gameplay problem and an (unexpected) solution. Rather, we experienced the exhilarating feeling of *having figured it out ourselves*, that is, the fit between our joint agency and the demands of the game. We experienced the adequacy of that solution, as generated by our own decision-making, to the game's challenge. This corresponds to the harmony of action.

Something similar goes for the harmony of capacity. Nguyen considers that ordinary spectators only get 'some small whisper' of the latter, insofar as the efforts, capacities, and limitations of the player are not always tangible, knowable, or displayed outwardly (2020, p. 110). However, secondary players clearly have a sense of *their* own capacities, and can therefore experience them as being pushed to their limit when they engage in tandem play. In addition, when secondary players are around, the capacities of the person holding the controller aren't necessarily the only ones being put to the test. The collective capacities of the group may be on the line. When a group of friends attempt a difficult boss fight, shouting instructions, analyzing attack patterns, etc., they may experience the capacities of the team as being pushed to

their limit. One explanation for this is that videogaming, while involving sensorimotor aptitudes to various degrees, also typically demands cognitive tasks of spatial reasoning, pattern recognition, problem-solving, and so on. And surely, you can accomplish these without holding a controller. This means that secondary players may experience more than a 'whisper' of the harmony of capacity.

It should be stressed, lastly, that not all videogames are equally amenable to tandem play. Consider videogame genres where the challenge is predominantly 'cognitive', such as puzzle games, turn-based strategy games or RPGs, card-games, point and clicks, or certain slow-paced simulations, etc. The gameplay of these games does not mainly consist in the performance of kinesthetic action but also lies, for an important part, in the thought process lying behind these actions. Since individuals do not need to hold a controller to partake in the relevant cognitive processes, these videogames facilitate tandem play. They also give secondary players an experience not too far off that of the primary player. The same, however, does not go for what Karhulahti (2013) calls "kinesthetic" videogames, among which are most first-person shooters, platformers, real-time strategy games, or dance and music videogames. Here, the gameplay and challenges will mostly depend on certain sensorimotor skills. This will tend to hinder tandem play, insofar as such kinesthetic actions can hardly be mentally replicated by secondary players. Overall, then, tandem play seems sensitive to the genre of videogame under consideration.[3]

I argued in this section that the widespread phenomenon of tandem play offers a way to challenge the anti-spectator challenge presented in section 1. In its essence, the

[3] Note that I do not claim that tandem play is only *possible* with certain genres of videogames, but merely that some genres will tend to make it easier or more significant. This qualification seems required for two reasons. First, most videogames actually blend sensorimotor and cognitive challenges, allowing for tandem play at least with respect to some *aspects* of the game. Second, even in the case of predominantly kinesthetic games, it seems that expert secondary players could mentally replicate and communicate to the primary player the kinesthetic actions required ('perform a jump by pressing X, and then a wall slide by pressing R2').

point is that this challenge overlooks the fact that secondary players, which are a subset of videogame spectators, are engaged in a form of gameplay. As a result, they can experience the various types of practical harmonies that Nguyen is concerned with. If that's right, we cannot say that *all* videogame spectators miss out on the agential qualities which are arguably essential to the proper appreciation of games.

3. True spectators and simulated play

At this stage, I anticipate an objection. Some might consider that secondary players, as the name already suggests, have trespassed the boundaries of spectatorship. Tandem play, they could say, doesn't establish that some videogame spectators may engage in a form of play. Rather, it shows that secondary players aren't really spectators at all. The suggestion here is that the 'true' spectator is entirely deprived of any influence on the game, whether direct or not, and that secondary players therefore do not fall into that category. On this view, even if we granted that secondary players engage in a form of play, the original challenge would retain much of its force, for it would still apply to true spectators. And in fact, when people watch recorded streams on YouTube, the content is completely out of their hands. They can't interact with the streamer. Nor can they have any sort of influence on the game. The worry resurfaces.

My reply to this objection is that even 'true' spectators can engage in a form of play, and therefore, access the agential qualities normally available to the player. When I watch a *Hearthstone* stream on YouTube, the course of the game has already been set. However, I typically review and mentally play out the possible moves available to the streamer on their turn. Considering the cards they have in their hands, the state of the board, and so on, I determine what *I* would do if I were in that particular position. My suggestion is that, by so doing, I engage in a form of *pretense* or *simulated* play. This is not just to say that my spectating activity involves a form of fiction or make-believe (see Walton 2015). Rather, I mean that such imaginative or simulated engagement really involves a form of playing. This activity of simulated play, which I

take to be widespread in spectator gaming, is a vicarious play experience, where you don't play *with* the other (as in cases secondary play) but *through* the other.

Is simulated play a genuine kind of play? I don't see any reason to say that it isn't. On standard accounts, play is defined as an activity which is voluntary, separated from ordinary life and unproductive, circumscribed to special times and places, and rule-based (see Caillois 1958; Huizinga 1955). This is entirely compatible with the contention that spectators, when they mentally assess potential moves, are actually playing. To consider another influential view, Suits (1978) argues that gameplaying involves the voluntary acceptance of unnecessary obstacles. This characterization seems to apply equally well to simulated play. When I think about the moves available to the streamer, I subject myself to suboptimal means —the constitutive rules of the game— in my mental playout. In fact, using more efficient means would be easier for me than for the actual player. Since I'm not constrained by the computer program, I could imaginatively give myself some unfair advantage or modify the rules as I wish. Yet, I do no such thing. And I don't do it precisely for the same reason that other players generally don't breach the rules: I want to experience the potentialities made possible by the acceptance of these rules, or in Nguyen's terms, the type of agency afforded by the game.

If simulated play really is a form of play, what guarantees that it is the playing *of a game*, rather than an instance of what some call "freeplay", i.e., play to which no particular game is attached? What game (if any) am I playing when I watch recorded streams? Should we say that I can play *Hearthstone* by spectating an instance of the game on YouTube? This requires some qualification. When I engage in simulated play through a recorded *Hearthstone* stream, I'm clearly not playing the particular instance of *Hearthstone* I'm attending to, insofar as its actual state and progression will not react to my mental moves. In fact, I may not even be playing *any* actual instance of that game, insofar as I do not engage with a real opponent and merely explore a few potential moves. For this reason, it might be better to say that my activity involves playing a potential and fragmentary, or 'quasi-', game of *Hearthstone*. That quasi-game

virtually follows the same rules as *Hearthstone* and takes for basis the actual instance of the game I'm attending to. As such, it qualifies as a playing *of a game*, a game which bears sufficient resemblance to *Hearthstone* to possess the same type of agential qualities. However, that simulated game differs from *Hearthstone* in that it is bound to remain purely mental and incomplete (after all, I only explore a few options and moves ahead). It is also quite fragile and short-lived, for each unexpected move from the streamer or their opponent can lead me to update my simulation, and thus, to engage imaginatively with another distinct quasi-game. Still, it remains sufficiently linked to *Hearthstone* to offer the same, or at any rate a highly similar, type of agential experience.[4]

The notion of simulated play explains at least part of the attraction there is to spectating games. People don't just enjoy seeing others making good or strategic moves. They enjoy anticipating and finding these moves for themselves. This means that the spectator's pleasure is often a *ludic* pleasure, in which simulated play is centrally involved. If the move I had mentally foreseen comes to be realized, I feel some kind of reward: that of having anticipated (what I take to be) the correct choice. When it's not, I can feel annoyed (if my imagined move was indeed superior) or pleasantly surprised (if it turns out that there was a better option I hadn't considered). This, I think, reveals that the spectator's agency is engaged in the activity of simulated play.

Now, some might complain that the notion of simulated play, far from shedding light on spectator gaming, threatens to make it unintelligible. Indeed, why

[4] An anonymous reviewer asks: instead of seeing simulated play as the playing a *quasi-game*, couldn't we see it instead as the *quasi-playing* of a game? While the latter view might be defensible, I favor the first one, for two reasons. First, and as mentioned above, the game one imaginatively engages with in simulated play cannot easily be seen as just the "same game" as the one being spectated, insofar as it is too unstable, fragmentary, and short-lived. Second, simulated play involves an element of pretense, but it remains a genuine form of play. In fact, what the spectator does when engaging in simulated play could mirror exactly what the primary player is doing themselves —modulo the physical interaction. So, it's unclear what would make this activity a 'quasi' playing of a game.

spectate a *Hearthstone* game, if you could engage in simulated play merely by *imagining* one?

There are at least two replies to this objection.

First, although chess grandmasters can mentally simulate an entire game by successively playing both black and white in their head (that would be a 1-player variant of blindfold chess), they might still prefer watching other people play chess. This is because watching real opponents introduces an element of unpredictability, which is trivially unavailable when you play both sides. As such, simulated play does not make spectator gaming useless.

Second, a full-fledged mental simulation, even if it might be possible in chess and a few other games, seems unavailable in the case of most videogames. It hardly seems possible to mentally play out a full *Hearthstone* game. The culprit is not just our finite imaginative or mental capacities. It is also that *Hearthstone* centrally involves an element of unpredictability (e.g., through card draw, random effects, etc.). As such, it seems that simulated play requires an external basis. Watching someone else play not only facilitates, but typically conditions simulated play, insofar as it provides the starting point which guides and drives your imaginings, by tying them to a particular instance of a game.

Another potential worry is that simulated play might not be possible with *all* (video)games. *Hearthstone* is admittedly well-suited for this kind of mental simulation, insofar as its gameplay requires taking some time to think about potential moves before acting. For this reason, there is not much difference between what I'm doing when mentally assessing possible plays and what the streamer are doing themselves before making a move. However, would the same go with "kinesthetic" games, in which the challenge is mainly psychomotor rather than cognitive? It seems quite dubious that simulated play could occur when manual dexterity, swift reflexes, or sensorimotor coordination form the core challenge of the game. With such videogames, gameplay cannot be detached from the interface of the computer, and thus, does not seem to allow simulated play. This objection is not overly concerning,

however. For even if kinesthetic videogames were not apt to support simulated play, a wide array of other videogames could, namely, those that are predominantly 'cognitive'. This is enough to warrant my conclusion that at least some paradigmatic spectators can engage in a form of gameplay.

All this said, one should ask: how does the notion of simulated play help answering the initial challenge against spectator gaming? The answer is this: if 'true' spectators may occasionally engage in simulated play, and if that activity is relevantly tied to the agential space of the game they are attending to, they can access the agential qualities that Nguyen takes to be the privilege of the player. Being engaged in simulated play allows them to exercise their capacities within the (quasi-)game's sculpted form of agency. By mentally simulating and assessing possible moves related to the *Hearthstone* game I'm watching, I inhabit the agential space of the game and take pleasure in doing so.

With simulated play, comes the ability to access the practical harmonies that Nguyen sees, for the most part, as the privilege of the player. When I figure out a game-winning combination, for instance, I can experience the fit between my own *simulated* agency and the game's challenge —i.e., the harmony of action. The harmony of capacity can also be experienced through simulated play. When the streamer only has a few seconds left to finish their turn, trying to find the optimal move within that short interval can push my (game-relevant) capacities close to their limit. If I succeed, I can experience the harmony between my whole simulated agency and the demands of the game. Thus, spectators engaged in simulated play can experience the aforementioned types of practical harmony. And if they can, it's because although they aren't *physically* acting in-game, they are *imaginatively* so.

It important to stress, finally, that one can watch a game purely passively, without engaging in simulated play —in that case, I grant that the original argument against spectator gaming retains its strength. In addition, it should be stressed that simulated play only seems possible given some previous knowledge or mastery of the videogame one is attending to. In order to mentally assess and explore potential

moves, you must have some previous knowledge of the kinds of challenges involved in that game, of its rules, and of the kinds of capacities required to meet them. If you don't know the rules of the game, what the primary player can and cannot do, etc., you cannot engage imaginatively with the agential space of the game, and thus, cannot experience its agential qualities, or at least the full range of them. To simulate playing a game, in short, you must know how to play it full stop, at least to some extent. So, I'm not saying that *all* videogame spectators engage in simulated play. Yet, the fact that some do is enough to challenge the initial assumption that spectating and playing are strictly incompatible, and with it, the anti-spectator challenge.

4. Conclusion

Many think that there's something odd about *watching* other people play videogames. The underlying worry, I suggest, lies in the belief that some important and 'agential' aspects of games would be primarily, if not only, available to the player; the result being that spectator gaming involves an inappropriate kind of engagement. I proposed two replies to that challenge. The first is that 'secondary players', i.e., individuals who indirectly take part in the game, can access the relevant agential properties. The second reply is that even paradigmatic spectators can engage in *simulated* play, and therefore, access these properties as well.

Both of these replies challenge the widespread assumption that spectating is strictly incompatible with playing. By this, I do not mean to deny that the experiences of spectators and players may importantly differ. I simply hope to have shown that not interacting with a videogame does not mean that you can't experience its agential qualities —the way it constrains action and shapes decision, the kinds of capacities it requires, the types of practical rewards it can afford. If I am right, spectator gaming is therefore aptly named, for spectating videogames can be a form of gameplay.[5]

[5] I wish to thank Arnaud Guilloux for helpful and intense discussions on spectator gaming. My gratitude also goes to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

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