

Agency, Appropriation, Politics: Three Epistemological Keys Towards an Aesthetics of Play

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ABSTRACT:

Based on a dialogue with authors of pragmatist philosophy, game studies, and communication, this article intends to understand the relationship between aesthetic experience and ludic media, in particular digital games, in what this relationship distinguishes from the aesthetic experiences provided by different media, such as literature, music, film and the arts in general. To better understand this relationship, we propose the presentation and development of three epistemological axes (or keys), namely: i) aesthetics and agency, ii) aesthetics and appropriation, and iii) aesthetics and politics. Furthermore, this article intends to present and comment on selected works of digital games to illustrate the relationship between play and aesthetic experience in each of those respective axes.

KEY WORDS:

aesthetics, agency, appropriation, digital games, epistemology, play, politics.

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Introduction

As pointed out by the Dutch historian J. Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, his seminal work on the relationship between games and culture, *ludic*¹ practices are closely linked to the nature of animals in general and human beings in particular.² In an example provided by the author, it is common for young animals, whether wild or domestic, to play with each other in what appears to be, to the most attentive observers, something between free improvisation and a simulation of combat. Even before they know the notions of play and games, children interact with objects at their disposal, exploring their possibilities. M. Jay states that the first sense to be examined by human beings, even as babies, is touch: through this sense, they first apprehend the world around them by interacting with the objects surrounding them.³

J. Huizinga was one of the first theorists to point out the relationship between play and cultural practices in different societies and how that would be of fundamental importance in the production of meanings by the subjects. In his treatise *Homo Ludens*, a seminal work for understanding the relationship between play and culture, J. Huizinga states: “[play] adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function”.⁴

1 Remark by the author: Although *ludic* is a term/concept not so widespread within Anglophone game studies research, it can already be found several times J. Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, as in: “The agonistic or ludic element in war may be illustrated by examples chosen at random from diverse civilizations and periods”; HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 96.; Remark by the author: Therefore, we opted for using this term in this paper, sometimes as a synonym of *play*, sometimes of *playful*.

2 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 1.

3 JAY, M.: *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 1994, p. 6.

4 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 9.

Based on J. Huizinga's proposition, we can reflect on the role of the ludic – so relegated to a specific inferior stratum nowadays⁵ – in the set of experiences that give meaning to human existence itself, since time immemorial, in its daily life. It is not surprising, therefore, that games – structured ways of playing, according to R. Caillois⁶ – have had, since ancient times, a prominent place in the most diverse societies. European palaces, for example, shelters for generations and generations of members of the nobility, had – and still have, even if inactive in their original function and maintained as museums today – unique rooms for games, for idle time. Kings, queens, and members of the nobility devoted precious time to recreational activities; games, therefore, were part of the daily life of the courts⁷. These days, in the very 21st century and, probably, following the tradition left by centuries-old ancestors, it is enough to walk through the various gardens of Beijing on weekends to come across groups of individuals around boards of classic Chinese games, such as *Xiangqi* or *Mahjong* (Picture 1).⁸



Picture 1: *Xiangqi*'s game session in Beijing

Source: own processing

Contrary to the idea commonly publicized in the Western world that individuals clustered in public spaces around board game tables are unproductive and idle beings, in the aforementioned China, for example, such activities tend to be seen from another perspective, that is, as forms of sociability and cognitive stimulation, especially among elders. It seems to us that the establishment of capitalism, since at least the 20th century, meant that a fundamental part of the very constitution of the human being, which is the ludic aspect, was left behind in favour of a notion of productivity and wealth generation in which there is no more room for activities that do not bring profit *per se*, as is the case of purely ludic activities.⁹

5 Remark by the author: An exception is made when the word 'ludic' appears as a qualifier of any experience, even though this experience does not necessarily have a relationship with the idea of ludic that we develop in this article, being, in most cases, aimed at marketing advertising purposes, as if the simple fact that something is 'ludic' characterizes it as of greater quality.

6 See: CAILLOIS, R.: *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

7 For more information, see: PASTOREAU, M.: *A vida cotidiana no tempo dos cavaleiros da tavola redonda*. Sao Paulo : Companhia das Letras, 1989.

8 Remark by the author: We had this first-hand experience when visiting Beijing in 2015.

9 See: BONENFANT, M.: *Le libre jeu: Reflexion sur l'appropriation de l'activite ludique*. Montreal : Liber, 2015.

Provided that the ludic is displaced from its *locus* as an essential element in the production of meanings, as J. Huizinga proposes, what can be said about the association between ludic practices and the production of beauty or, in a broader sense, the production of aesthetic experiences? In this sense, once again, J. Huizinga was one of the pioneers in drawing up such an approach. It is the historian who says, in the same work *Homo Ludens*: “The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. It may be that this aesthetic factor is identical with the impulse to create orderly form, which animates play in all its aspects. The words we use to denote the elements of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us; it is ‘enchanted’, ‘captivating’. It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony”.¹⁰

In the scope of this work, we do not limit the understanding of aesthetics to the production of beauty, a common assumption within the disciplines of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art. Conversely, we understand aesthetics or, even more broadly, the *aesthetic experience* through the same epistemological key that has been developed within the field of communication¹¹ and first brought to the fore by theorists generally framed in what is conventionally called pragmatist philosophy, or pragmatism, such as J. Dewey and R. Shusterman.¹² More specifically, in this article, we intend to investigate the relationship between ludic practices in general – and videogames in particular – and the production of aesthetic experiences that are somehow ‘triggered’ by ludic activity.

The notion of aesthetic experience, as we work in this article, originates from pragmatist philosophy, especially from the works of C. Peirce, W. James, and J. Dewey.¹³ Differently, i) from the analytical tradition, which seeks to understand and extract aesthetic meanings from “foundationalist distinctions and ahistorical positive essences”,¹⁴ or even ii) from the thinking of philosophers such as D. Hume and I. Kant about aesthetics that, despite displacing – to a certain extent – the source of the aesthetic experience from the object to the subject, still has its focus on eminently human aspects, such as D. Hume’s ‘standard of taste’¹⁵ or the ‘aesthetic judgment’ of I. Kant,¹⁶ the pragmatist philosophy seeks to understand and extract meanings from aesthetic experiences – or from ‘an experience’, in the words of J. Dewey¹⁷, from the interactions between creature and environment. In this sense, what is at stake are the affectations between these two instances, in what is revealed to the senses, to perceptions. Furthermore, in this epistemological key, an aesthetic experience can occur both in the interaction between the subject and the work of art and between the subject and any everyday phenomenon.

10 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 10.

11 See: CARDOSO FILHO, J.: Uma matriz comunicacional da sensibilidade. In MENDONÇA, C., DUARTE, E., CARDOSO FILHO, J. (eds.): *Comunicação e sensibilidade: pistas metodológicas*. Belo Horizonte : PPGCOM UFMG, 2016, p. 37-53.

12 For more information, see: DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.; SHUSTERMAN, R.: *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

13 See also: PEIRCE, C. S.: How to Make Our Ideas Clear. In *Popular Science Monthly*, 1878, Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 286-302.; JAMES, W.: *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. New York, NY : Penguin Books, 2000.; DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.

14 SHUSTERMAN, R.: *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 4.

15 See: HUME, D.: *Ensaio morais, políticos e literários*. São Paulo : Nova Cultural, 2004.

16 For more information, see: KANT, I.: *Crítica da faculdade do juízo*. Rio de Janeiro : Forense Universitária, 2012.

17 For example, see: DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.

Therefore, on the one hand, we have an approach that favours intellectual elaboration as a basic premise for aesthetic enjoyment. This, in turn, concentrates a large part of its efforts on experimenting with 'beauty', living up, perhaps, to a tradition that comes from Plato, passing through A. Baumgarten and reaching contemporaneity – without suffering its criticism. In Hippias Major, one of the essential classic texts of the disciplines of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art, it is Socrates who asks: "So, explain to me, stranger, I would speak again: what is this beauty?".¹⁸ It is A. Baumgarten, admittedly the founder of the discipline of Aesthetics in the eighteenth century, who says: "To the aesthetic doctrine belongs: 1) ALL BEAUTIFUL KNOWLEDGE, that is, knowledge about objects that must be thought of beautifully, since this knowledge exhibits a more adequate knowledge than that provided by non-erudite culture".¹⁹ J. V. G. de Oliveira, philosopher of art, states: "It is opportune to insist: the aesthetic experience begins in the senses and has its conclusive moment in intelligence".²⁰

Two assumptions reside in this tradition that, despite not being part of the central questions of this investigation, we intend to question within the scope of the research project that this article is part of: i) that aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the understanding of beauty, exclusively and; ii) that the aesthetic experience, for it to occur, must necessarily be processed in the intellect. Furthermore, in line with pragmatism philosophy, we believe that the aesthetic experience does not necessarily need an intellectual or conceptual formulation to be apprehended or, in R. Shusterman's words, does not need to be interpreted²¹.

Thereby, the main objective of this article is to present and develop three axes – or keys – to understand the relationship between aesthetic experience and ludic media – a concept that will be worked on in the article – in which this relationship differs from the aesthetic experiences provided by different media, such as literature, music, film and the arts in general. They are i) aesthetics and agency, ii) aesthetics and appropriation, iii) aesthetics and politics. To achieve its objectives, the article first focuses on the concept of *ludic* – a term that reached a ubiquitous place in contemporary media discourses – and proposes the idea of *ludic media*. Then, we develop the three axes mentioned above, presenting, throughout the text, selected works from the universe of digital games to illustrate each proposed axis. In this way, we expect to contribute, to some extent, to the understanding of the aesthetic phenomena resulting from the interaction between the individual and certain media, which we call *ludic media*, which, for the scope of this work, digital games are part of.

Ludic, Play and Games

Over the last few years, or even decades, the term *ludic* has become pervasive in our society, becoming embedded in the most diverse areas: *ludic teaching*, *ludic learning*, *ludic activity*, *ludic technologies*, and even *ludic games* – which would be a kind of pleonasm, as we will see later – are current expressions that can be seen in different means of communication. At the same time, using this term is often confused with others that, in principle,

18 PLATÃO: *Hippias Major*. Belém : Editora da Universidade Federal do Pará, 1980, p. 371.

19 BAUMGARTEN, A.: *Estética: a lógica da arte e do poema*. Petrópolis : Vozes, 1993, p. 114.

20 DE OLIVEIRA, J. V. G.: *Estética, vivência humana: temas e controvérsias na filosofia*. Rio de Janeiro : Letra Capital, 2007, p. 113.

21 See: SHUSTERMAN, R.: Beneath Interpretation: Against Hermeneutic Holism. In *The Monist*, 1990, Vol. 73, No. 2, p. 181-204.

would not have a direct relationship, such as *entertainment* or *fun*. Although the ludic can be part of activities aimed at entertainment or fun, this is not an intrinsic relationship.²² Thus, it is crucial to present a definition, albeit not definitive, about the concept of ludic.

Based on its etymological character, ludic has its roots in the Latin *ludus*, a word that points to multiple meanings, at least in its origin. According to S. Bonner,²³ in ancient Roman society, *ludus* referred to the school in a broad sense. Hence the expressions *ludus litterarius* (school of letters) and *ludus magister* (primary teacher), among other expressions derived from *ludus*. Right away, a central question for this understanding appears: how did a word associated, at first, with the semantic fields of school, teaching, and learning come to be associated with the play universe? According to Bonner, there is no consensus on how the term *ludus* came to designate the concept of play. However, the author points out that Seneca describes *ludus* as a 'training space'²⁴ – hence, probably, the use of *ludus* as a 'gym' for training gladiators and its association with the concepts of play and competition – the latter being one of the fundamental characteristics of play and games, according to R. Caillois,²⁵ who describes it as the agonistic character present in play and games.²⁶

J. Huizinga²⁷ also departs from the linguistic sphere in his journey toward understanding the ludic aspect of culture(s). In his linguistic/culturalist approach, the author resorts to Greek, Sanskrit, sets of Germanic, Romance, and Semitic languages, among others. To synthesize and structure J. Huizinga's hypotheses/conclusions, I will enumerate the meanings of the ludic in some of the languages/cultures investigated by the author. However, before that, I would like to explain, together with J. Huizinga, that a linguistic analysis alone cannot handle – at least entirely – the task of defining a concept, especially that of the ludic, however simple it may seem at first sight. As the author well underlines: "When speaking of play as something known to all, and when trying to analyse or define the idea expressed in that word, we must always bear in mind that the idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it".²⁸ Thus, this systematization aims at approximating the concept of play/ludic in its historicity from the language, as observed by the Dutch author.

First, let us make an observation that J. Huizinga himself makes in his work about the difficulty of translating, in different languages, the word used to define the concept of play/ludic, which, many times, is confused a priori with that of *game*. The work *Homo Ludens*, in its translation into English – a language close to Dutch since both belong to the trunk of Germanic languages – uses the word *play* as a synonym for ludic, as we use it in some Latin languages, such as Portuguese (*lúdico*) and French (*ludique*). This can be verified in the translations of his work into Portuguese, as published by Perspectiva, the copyright holder of the work in Brazil. Both in the widespread 1990 edition and the most recent

22 For example, see: HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

23 BONNER, S.: *Education in ancient Rome: from the Elder Cato to the younger Pliny*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 2012, p. 56.

24 Ibidem, p. 57.

25 See: CAILLOIS, R.: *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

26 Remark by the author: R. Caillois classifies games into four categories, namely: *agôn*, *alea*, *ilinx*, and *mimicry*. In the author's conception, *agôn* refers to the character of dexterity and skills, usually present in competitive games; *alea* refers to the random character (luck), present in several games, especially in the so-called 'games of chance'; *ilinx* refers to the sensory character present in some games and ludic activities, such as car races or roller coasters, for example; finally, *mimicry* refers to the imaginative character (or 'imitation') present in play and games, such as role-playing games (*Role-Playing Games/RPGs*), or even children's 'make believe' games. Also, according to the author, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and more than one of them can be verified in the same game/ludic activity.

27 For more information, see: HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

28 Ibidem, p. 28.

revised and updated 2019 edition,²⁹ the translators sometimes translate *play* into *game*, sometimes into *ludic*: from chapter 1 to chapter 8 of the Brazilian translation, *play* in their titles is translated directly into *game*. From chapter 9 to chapter 12, *play*, also in their titles, is translated into *ludic*. Thus, for instance, in Portuguese, one can assume the great proximity between the concept of ludic and the idea of play and game, in its most diverse meanings.

Returning to J. Huizinga's propositions, when analysing the idea of play/ludic in the Greek language and culture, the author explains that the Greek language has three words to designate play in general: *paidiá* (παιδιά) referring to children's play/games; *athíro* (ἀθύρω) or *athírma*, (ἀθύρμα) which relates to ideas of frivolity or futility; and, finally, *agón*, (ἀγών) pertaining to ideas of skill, competitions or tournaments. It is essential to point out that R. Caillois³⁰ performs a general classification of games (or ludic activities) into two large groups, which he calls *ludus* and *paidia*, the first being related to structured games, with established rules, and the second related to free play, without closed rules, expressed primarily in children's activities. In addition, R. Caillois also borrows the word *agón* from the Greek to designate one of the four characteristics of games he proposed.³¹

When analysing the Sanskrit language, J. Huizinga states that at least four verbal roots correspond to the idea of play. They are *kridati*, related to playing between animals, children, and adults, but also with the meaning of 'jumping' or 'dancing'; *divyati*, relating to games of chance and also to the ideas of telling jokes, but also with the meaning of 'throwing' or 'throwing something'; *vilasa*, relating to 'sudden appearance', but also to playing and occupying oneself in general; and, finally, *lila*, which refers to the ideas of 'as if', 'seem', 'imitate', but which would also have the original meaning of 'swing'. According to J. Huizinga, the common denominator among all these radicals would be the idea of 'rapid movement', which approaches the ludic characteristic *ilinx*, as treated by R. Caillois.³²

Finally, it is of fundamental importance to analyse some Germanic and Romance languages, as performed by J. Huizinga, for a better understanding of the concept of play/ludic. As in Sanskrit, it seems that in ancient Germanic languages such as Old English and High and Low German, the root that would give rise to the idea of play is the same – *lai-kan* – giving rise to the words *leika*, *leka*, and *lege* of recent Scandinavian languages (Icelandic, Swedish, and Danish, respectively), whose meaning is 'to play'. However, the original meaning of the radical would be in the ideas of 'rapid movement', 'rhythmic movement', and the like. According to J. Huizinga: "As we have seen before, rapid movement must be regarded as the concrete starting-point of many play-words. We recall Plato's conjecture that the origin of play lies in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap".³³

Regarding the idea of play/game in the Dutch and German languages, we have the Proto-Germanic *spil* radical, which refers to the notion of play. Hence, we have *spielen/spiel* and *spelen/spel* (play/game, in German and Dutch, respectively). In the English language, the words that designate the ideas of play and ludic revolve around the same prefix *play*: *play* (noun), *to play* (verb), *playful* (adjective), and *playfulness* (a noun that gives the adjective a sense of quality). Etymologically, *play* originates from the Old English *plega*, which carries the meaning of playing (verb), game, toy, theatrical play, and, not least, physical exercise.³⁴ In addition to the meanings related to the act of playing a game, *spielen*, *spelen*,

29 See also: HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: o jogo como elemento da cultura*. São Paulo : Perspectiva, 2019.

30 For more information, see: CAILLOIS, R.: *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

31 Ibidem.

32 Ibidem.

33 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 37.

34 See: *Play*. [online]. [2023-11-17]. Available at: <<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/play>>. *Play*. [online]. [2023-11-17]. Available at: <<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=play>>.

and *play* also have the sense of playing a musical instrument. According to J. Huizinga, this relationship probably comes from the relationship between the skills needed to play an instrument and “the nimble and orderly movements of the fingers”.³⁵ The author also deduces the close relationship between playing a game (*to play a game*), playing a musical instrument (*to play the piano*, for example), and the aesthetic experience. In the author’s words: “Making music bears at the outset all the formal characteristics of play proper: the activity begins and ends within strict limits of time and place, is repeatable, consists essentially in order, rhythm, alternation, transports audience and performers alike out of ‘ordinary’ life into a sphere of gladness and serenity, which makes even sad music a lofty pleasure. In other words, it ‘enchants’ and ‘enraptures’ them. In itself it would be perfectly understandable, therefore, to comprise all music under the heading of play”.³⁶

In the Romance languages, it seems that the only one that carries this double meaning of playing (a game) and playing (an instrument) is French (*jouer*). According to J. Huizinga³⁷, this may have occurred due to the Germanic influence in that language.

In a previous article,³⁸ we pointed out the relationship between play, music, and aesthetic experience in the European electronic music scene, particularly in the *chiptune music scene*. In our understanding, such a relationship is far from just linguistic but is directly connected to the ludic character of musical activity in terms of poetics, aesthetics, and performance. In this sense, playing the musical instrument is closely related to *playing with* the music/instrument, experimenting and exploring its possibilities, and discovering potential arrangements (and rearrangements) embedded in it. Here, we echo V. Flusser’s idea of playing with the photographic device to defeat it – that is, to extract new poetic and aesthetic possibilities from it.³⁹

Finally, in line with J. Huizinga’s reflections on the linguistic origins of the concept of play, we propose the idea of *ludic media* as one that demands direct action – *extranoematics*, in the words of E. Aarseth,⁴⁰ as we will see later – on the part of the subject that relates to it. As we saw earlier, a significant amount of the meanings surrounding the concept of play originate – at least in their linguistic aspect – from the ideas of action and movement: playing, playing an instrument, and competing (athletically and sporting), are all activities that presuppose voluntary (non-forced) actions. There are ongoing *interactions* in such activities, whether between subjects or between subjects and objects. Echoing J.-L. Boissier’s conception of relationship as form, according to which “interactivity is not the simple mediation of access to the work, it is an integral part of the work”,⁴¹ we suggest that the completeness of the (aesthetic) experience in the “ludic media” is directly related to the active and direct participation (interaction) of the subject with the work. When approaching interactive works of art, K. Kwastek states that “[...] the aesthetic experience lies in the action of realizing the work”.⁴² In line with V. Flusser, K. Kwastek relates the conductive processes of an aesthetic experience in interactive works to “playing,” “playing with the work” (device, in V. Flusser): “The new types of aesthetic experience offered by interactive media art [...] are mainly based on uncovering the structures and control mechanisms

35 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 42.

36 Ibidem.

37 Ibidem.

38 For more information, see: CARDOSO FILHO, J., FERREIRA, E.: Playing (with) the Music: Jogo e Apropriação na Cena Musical Chiptune. In *Journal of Digital Media & Interaction*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 42-57.

39 See: FLUSSER, V.: *Filosofia da caixa preta: ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*. Rio de Janeiro : Relume Dumará, 2002.

40 See also: AARSETH, E.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

41 BOISSIER, J. L.: *La relation comme forme: l'interactivité en art*. Dijon : Les Presses du Réel, 2009, p. 10.

42 KWASTEK, K. *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2013, p. 48.

used in digital media and related perceptual processes".⁴³ As we will see later, playing the game is also playing *with* the game in the sense of experimenting with its possibilities and extracting new meanings and aesthetic experiences from it.

Play and Aesthetic Experience: An Epistemological Proposal

Next, we present the central proposal of this article, that is, the classification of the relationship between aesthetics (or aesthetic experience) and play in three axes or epistemological keys: aesthetics and agency, aesthetics and appropriation, and aesthetics and politics. This tripartite division aims to grant greater clarity and epistemological coherence to the dialogue between two theoretical fields that are distant at first, that of aesthetics, in its pragmatist sense, and that of the study of games (game studies), as the latter has been developed over the last two decades.⁴⁴

a) Aesthetics and agency

A central element for understanding the relationship between ludic media and aesthetic experience is the activity's role in producing diverse aesthetic experiences. By speaking of *activity*, we intend to differentiate between the cognitive and mechanical demands necessary to experience a given medium. Based on this differentiation, E. Aarseth⁴⁵ coined the terms *cybertext* and *ergodic literature*. For the author, *cybertexts* are texts in which it is necessary to make an *extranoematic* effort to develop the reading experience. By *extranoematic* effort, the author calls for an effort that goes beyond turning pages and moving the eyes in reading a book or the cognitive effort necessary to understand a film or a printed text. As happens, for example, with the reader of an *Interactive Fiction* text, who must decide between different options for the text to unfold.

E. Aarseth clarifies that – and despite the term he created – *cybertexts* are not strictly linked to digital media, pointing to other texts as being *cybertexts*, such as the Chinese *I Ching* or the novel *Rayuela*, by J. Cortazar. In all these texts, the reader needs to make an *extranoematic*, non-trivial effort⁴⁶ for the text to unfold. A. Machado states that, in these texts, the reader's interaction is "not only desirable but even required".⁴⁷ It is not our intention to say that in other types of text, such as literature or film, there is no interaction, primarily cognitive, on the reader's part. Instead, we intend to show that in *cybertextual* media, the reader has the possibility, at least potentially, of intervening directly in its narrativity; however, many such options are limited by the authors of the work. In any case, there is a crucial difference when interacting with texts that do not depend on the

43 KWASTEK, K. *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2013, p. 55.

44 See: FALCÃO, T., MARQUES, D.: *Metagame: panoramas dos game studies no Brasil*. São Paulo : Intercom, 2017.

45 See also: AARSETH, E.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

46 For more information, see: ASCOTT, R.: *Nature II: Telematic Culture and Artificial Life*. In *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 1995, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 23-30.

47 MACHADO, A.: *Regimes de Imersão e Modos de Agenciamento*. In VASSALLO DE LOPES, M. I., DENCKER, A. (eds.): *XXV Congresso Anual em Ciência da Comunicação*. Salvador : Intercom, 2002, p. 2. [online]. [2023-11-17]. Available at: <<http://www.portcom.intercom.org.br/pdfs/9131a28436128d20687f11f8e2bf62e8.pdf>>.

reader to unfold – in their materiality – and texts that rely on their direct action, as in the case of cybertexts. J. Juul,⁴⁸ in his study of the ontology of games in general and digital games in particular, points out two biases for the study of games, a first that focuses on the game as an object and a second that focuses on the game as an activity. According to the author, any game, such as a chessboard, has a latent potential to be transformed into a game activity: this happens only when players take ownership of the game object and based on the interaction with its rules, give it life, thus transforming it into an *activity*.

We understand, along with E. Aarseth and J. Juul, that when we talk about activity, we are referring to the process of extranoematic actions concerning interacting with media, which would differentiate, for example, the experience of reading a book or watching a movie from that of playing a digital game. This, even though it inherits elements from previous media – such as written text, audiovisual, etc. – requires extranoematic actions: the player-reader must make decisions and choose paths so that the actions prescribed in the game code are developed.⁴⁹ These actions, carried out by the players, are associated with corresponding responses (*outputs*), giving meaning to such actions. It is what J. Murray⁵⁰ calls *agency*. In the author's words: "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices".⁵¹ That is to say, in these media in general and in digital games in particular, the reader – or player – is constantly encountering situations in which they must reflect, decide and act, and the agency over such decisions will outline the textual path for reader A, which will be different from reader B, thus providing different experiences. In the words of K. Isbister: "Specifically, two unique qualities, choice, and flow, set games apart from other media in terms of potential for emotional impact".⁵² Yet, according to K. Isbister, the player's agency over the game has real consequences for them, unlike other "narrative media," in which the spectator cannot, theoretically, influence its narrativity.

In most cases, these consequences will be emotions related to the binomials victory/defeat, joy/frustration, etc. In the book or the movie, the main character's defeat is just their defeat. In the game, the defeat of the main character directly reflects the player's inability to overcome the proposed challenges. In K. Isbister's words: "This capacity to evoke actual feelings of guilt from a fictional experience is unique to games. A reader or filmgoer may feel many emotions when presented with horrific fictional acts on the page or screen, but responsibility and guilt are generally not among them."⁵³ In this way, we believe that games can give rise to their own media/aesthetic experiences based on the direct interaction of the reader/player with them.

The relationship between action and aesthetic experience can already be verified in J. Dewey, when the author addresses the act of artistic creation (*poiesis*) as a vector of aesthetic experiences: for J. Dewey, not only the receiver of a work is capable of experiencing aesthetic experiences in relation to that work, but also its creator, during the creation process itself. As J. Dewey says: "The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that *its* qualities *as perceived* have controlled the question of production. The act of producing that is directed by intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled

48 For example, see: JUUL, J.: *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2005.

49 See also: AARSETH, E.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

50 For more information, see: MURRAY, J.: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 1998.

51 Ibidem, p. 126.

52 ISBISTER, K.: *How Games Moves Us: Emotion by Design*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2016, p. 2.

53 Ibidem, p. 8.

activity does not have. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works".⁵⁴

Therefore, it is possible to draw a parallel between J. Dewey's idea of the artist as a perceiver and the player/interactor of a cybertextual work. As much as they are not the *proponent* of the work, the player will realize the expressive potential of the work/game based on their agency. While performing significant actions, the player/interactor receives *feedback* from their actions, at this moment, as a receiver. In this way, the player/interactor is constantly shifting between the producer of meaningful actions within the interactive system – in our particular case, games – the act of creation (*poiesis*), and the receiver of responses/results (*outcomes*) produced by the system/game: the act of reception and experience (*aisthesis*).

To illustrate the relationship between agency and aesthetic experience, I would like to discuss two digital game titles: *Machinarium*⁵⁵ and *The Last of Us*⁵⁶. The first is an *indie* game developed by the Czech studio Amanita Design. The second one is a Triple-A game developed by the North American studio Naughty Dog.



Picture 2: "The Old Man" scene from *Machinarium*

Source: author's screenshot; AMANITA DESIGN: *Machinarium*. [digital game]. Prague : Amanita Design, 2009.

In *Machinarium*, one of the moments in which the sense of agency (in J. Murray's sense) can be raised is at the level that is conventionally called *The Old Man* (Picture 2). In this level of the game, Joseph, the character controlled by the player, must carry out a series of small *quests* to produce a certain amount of sunflower oil that will be placed in the wheelchair of a "robot-lord" so that it returns to function correctly. Although this task is something that the player must necessarily accomplish to advance in the game, this does

54 DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980, p. 48.

55 AMANITA DESIGN: *Machinarium*. [digital game]. Prague : Amanita Design, 2009.

56 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Naughty Dog, 2013.

not represent, in any way, an impediment to the (satisfactory) sense of accomplishment on the part of the player; that if it weren't for his sequence of actions – which includes overcoming challenges and solving *puzzles* – that gentleman would never have his wheelchair in total working order again. It is interesting to note how significant this stage of the game was for its community of players shortly after its launch. In a brief survey carried out by the Amanita Design studio on its Twitter account at the end of 2009, which asked its followers to answer what was the most exciting stage of the game, most of the posts contained the answer 'The Old Man'. As J. Cardoso Filho⁵⁷ points out, aesthetic experiences configure hegemonic and emerging sensibilities. We may, perhaps, in line with J. Dewey⁵⁸, state that the conclusion of this stage potentially provides the experimentation of *an experience*, a term used by the philosopher.

The Last of Us (TLOU), on the other hand, elicits a sense of agency in a different way than Machinarium. With its gameplay based more on sensory-motor skills and movement/exploration of its virtual world than on *puzzle* solving, TLOU invites the player, in control of the characters Joel and Ellie (the latter on a smaller scale), to survive and advance in a large territorial extension in a post-apocalyptic United States of America, fighting both human beings and other creatures, such as the undead. At various times, Ellie's survival depends on the player's skills – on Joel's control – on overcoming challenges, sometimes tricky (Picture 3). Unlike most survival games, in which one of the main concerns is the preservation of the character controlled by the player, TLOU incorporates aspects related to themes such as otherness and altruism in its *gameplay* and narrative/environment to generate the connection between the player and characters.



Picture 3: A scene from *The Last of Us*, with the characters Ellie and Joel

Source: author's screenshot; NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Naughty Dog, 2013.

Similar to what was previously described, regarding the closure of The Old Man stage in Machinarium, TLOU also potentially provides several situations in which its presentation/conflict/challenge resolution mechanic is modulated by moments of pure contemplation of the environment and appreciation of the dialogue between Joel and Ellie,

57 See also: CARDOSO FILHO, J.: Uma matriz comunicacional da sensibilidade. In MENDONÇA, C., DUARTE, E., CARDOSO FILHO, J. (eds.): *Comunicação e sensibilidade: pistas metodológicas*. Belo Horizonte : PPGCOM UFMG, 2016, p. 37-53.

58 For more information, see: DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.

contributing to the generation of empathy and affection between player and characters. In this sense, the conjunction between *gameplay*, narrative, and setting in TLOU has – potentially – the ability to modulate configurations of the player’s experience that meet one of the ‘demands’ presented by J. Dewey to have an experience or an aesthetic experience: the resolution of tension, towards balance.⁵⁹

b) Aesthetics and appropriation

The second key/axis in the proposition of this research for the relationship between aesthetic experience and play is what M. Bonenfant⁶⁰ calls ludic appropriation (*appropriation ludique*, in the original). M. Bonenfant, bringing back concepts previously discussed by J. Henriot⁶¹ – a francophone theorist who dedicated himself to the study of games – argues that every game, despite being constituted by a particular system of rules, thus composing its structure, is subject to a specific creative and inventive potential on the part of the *player*. If it were a completely closed structure, the player would just be a trigger of predetermined actions by the game developers, having, in this case, little or no agency; were it a completely open structure, the player would lose the sense of purpose and intentionality provided by the game, turning them into sandboxes, free improvisation, in the words of R. Caillois.⁶² So that the player can perform creative actions within the possibilities foreseen by the game, there must be a certain *ludic freedom*⁶³ so that the interactive experience does not tend – to return here to the concepts of *paidia* and *ludus* as developed by R. Caillois⁶⁴ – on the one hand, to *infinite freedom* (extreme *paidia*), or *no freedom* (extreme *ludus*). Within the balance between those extreme poles, the player can make unique meanings emerge from their interaction with the game-system. In the words of M. Bonenfant, “[i]f the game is based on rules that are intended to be fixed, it is, however, always updated differently by the player who tries it, giving rise to new meanings”.⁶⁵ In other words, appropriating (in a ludic sense) a game consists of apprehending its rules and performing emergent actions endowed with meaning, which will differ from player to player.

As discussed in previous work,⁶⁶ ludic appropriations have been part of the culture of games, probably since its beginnings. An example is the Tower-to-Tower Challenge (T2T Challenge), carried out by the *Halo: Combat Evolved*⁶⁷ player community from 2004 to 2011. In this challenge, proposed by the user *grenadesticker*, in the HighImpactHalo forum, on the 10th September 2004, players were required to perform an action that had not been anticipated by the game’s developers and which added nothing to the prescribed objectives of the game: to perform a jump – with the character Master Chief – between the two Blue Beam towers of the ‘Halo’ level of the aforementioned *Halo: Combat Evolved*. After years and years of attempts by countless community members, the goal was achieved in June 2011, seven years after its proposition, by the user *duelies*, a performance duly recorded and shared on the Internet, for the enjoyment of the community.

59 See also: DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.

60 For more information, see: BONENFANT, M.: *Le libre jeu: Réflexion sur l'appropriation de l'activité ludique*. Montréal : Liber, 2015.

61 See also: HENRIOT, J.: *Le jeu*. Paris : Editions Archétype82, 1983.

62 For more information, see: CAILLOIS, R.: *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

63 For example, see: BONENFANT, M.: *Le libre jeu: Réflexion sur l'appropriation de l'activité ludique*. Montréal : Liber, 2015.

64 See also: CAILLOIS, R.: *Les jeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

65 BONENFANT, M.: *Le libre jeu: Réflexion sur l'appropriation de l'activité ludique*. Montréal : Liber, 2015, p. 85-86.

66 For more information, see: FERREIRA, E.: The Game is Not Over: Relationships Between Ludic Appropriation and Production of Meaning in Video Games. In *Journal of Digital Media & Interaction*, 2023, Vol. 6, No. 14, p. 7-20.

67 BUNGIE: *Halo: Combat Evolved*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Bungie, 2001.

When the objectives prescribed by a game have been achieved, when there is nothing more to be done in a given game, individuals propose new challenges and actions not necessarily framed in their original prescriptions. Drawing a parallel with Flusser's thinking in relation to the 'black box' of photography, these actions – appropriations – aim at nothing but the "exhaustion of the program", the struggle "against the photographic apparatus", seeking to extract images – in this case, images and actions – never performed.⁶⁸ In line with J. Dewey's thinking,⁶⁹ we propose that ludic appropriation actions can lead players to 'an aesthetic experience' since they meet the requirements outlined by J. Dewey for such an experience to exist: intentionality, a cycle of actions that has beginning, development, and conclusion; and, finally, resolution of tension, towards a stable equilibrium. In the words of J. Dewey: "And when the participation comes after a phase of disruption and conflict, it bears within itself the germs of a consummation akin to the aesthetic".⁷⁰

c) Aesthetics and politics

Finally, the third axis in this journey to build a solid association between play and aesthetics lies in J. Rancière's propositions regarding the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Although almost all of his work addresses – in a more or less close way – this relationship, for the scope of this research, we will take as a basis perhaps one of his most referenced works in the field of communication and the social sciences: *The Politics of Aesthetics – The Distribution of the Sensible*.⁷¹

Strictly speaking, we are interested in the very idea formulated by J. Rancière of the distribution of the sensible. Far from being an easy or simple idea to be explained by third parties, what is at stake in the idea proposed by J. Rancière are "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity"⁷² and who is 'invited' to participate/share in such aesthetic acts. It is, as the author says: "A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who has a part in the act of governing and being governed. However, another form of distribution precedes this act of partaking in government: the distribution that determines those who have a part in the community of citizens".⁷³

Thus, instead of referring to aesthetics as a philosophy or discipline aimed at understanding beauty, or even sensitivity, J. Rancière's main concern lies, moreover, on understanding aesthetics and the sensible in their power to affect each and every individual, in the formation of a "specific type of humanity".⁷⁴

To develop his thinking, J. Rancière opposes what he calls the *representative regime* of the arts to the *aesthetic regime* of the arts. While in the former, what is in vogue are the notions of *mimesis* and representation in their organizations of ways of *doing*, *seeing*, and *judging* – art, sensibilities, etc. – in the latter, the *modes of being* of the arts are called to the foreground, freeing them from any hierarchy of genres and themes⁷⁵. In other words,

68 See: FLUSSER, V.: *Filosofia da caixa preta: ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*. Rio de Janeiro : Relume Dumará, 2002.

69 See also: DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980.

70 DEWEY, J.: *Art as Experience*. New York, NY : Perigee Books, 1980, p. 15.

71 For example, see: RANCIÈRE, J.: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London : Bloomsbury, 2013.

72 Ibidem, p. 204.

73 Ibidem, p. 252.

74 Ibidem, p. 450.

75 Ibidem.

what is at stake in the aesthetic regime proposed by J. Rancière is the potential to give visibility to the masses, to the anonymous subject, in their daily lives: “The fact that what is anonymous is not only susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art but also conveys a specific beauty is an exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts”.⁷⁶

In the ludic sphere in general and digital games in particular, in addition to the inclusion of themes and agendas generally left aside by the industry, such as characters belonging to different minorities – which, despite their importance, would still fall within what Rancière presents as a representative regime – we highlight actions carried out by communities of players, aiming at an effective distribution of the sensible. To illustrate this proposition, we bring the example of *Bomba Patch*,⁷⁷ a Brazilian *mod* of the game *Pro Evolution Soccer 6*⁷⁸ developed and distributed unofficially by members of the game’s players’ community.



Picture 4: A screenshot of the *Bomba Patch* game, captured in March 2020

Source: author’s screenshot; GEOMATRIX: *Bomba Patch*. [digital game]. São Paulo : GeoMatrix, 2007-2023.

Dissatisfied with the lack of voiceovers in Brazilian Portuguese in the *Pro Evolution Soccer* game series – something that, when it comes to football, comprises one of the important elements of the experience of spectatorship/reception of this sport in Brazil – some players started to practice modding – that is, changes to the game’s source code, resulting in various modifications, whether in its audiovisual components or its *game-play*. With specific exceptions, the practice of *modding* is expressly banned by game industry developers and producers, as it would be associated with piracy practices and copyright infringement. Despite such prohibitions, *modders*, in a visibly transgressive attitude, replace the audios of voiceovers in English (for example) with audios obtained from real voiceovers in Brazilian Portuguese, such as those broadcasted on major radio and television networks. In addition to replacing these audios, these *modders* also replace the names of “generic” teams and players with real teams and players – according to each season of Brazilian football, thus bringing greater *verisimilitude* to the sport with which players interact on the screen of their digital games, providing themselves

76 RANCIÈRE, J.: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London : Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 587.

77 GEOMATRIX: *Bomba Patch*. [digital game]. São Paulo : GeoMatrix, 2007-2023.

78 KONAMI: *Pro Evolution Soccer 6*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Konami, 2006.

and those who will come into contact with their *mods* with aesthetic-ludic experiences that are more in line with their everyday realities. In March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, the *mod*'s developer team released an update that featured the Japanese player Honda, who had recently signed a contract with Botafogo, a football team from Rio de Janeiro. In the update, in addition to the presence of Honda, the team players wore protective masks, and the stadium seats appeared empty, without fans (Picture 5). I propose that this type of action fits what J. Rancière calls "global political subjectivity, the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come".⁷⁹

Conclusion

The relationship between aesthetics, or the aesthetic experience, and ludic practices, particularly regarding digital games, is still little investigated, both in Brazil and worldwide. I am referring above all to aesthetics not taken in the strict sense, as previously mentioned, but in a broad sense and within the *framework* that communication researchers have worked on and that encompasses central issues for understanding the aesthetic experience in contemporary communication and mediatization processes. In this sense, this work intends to be the starting point for filling a certain gap in investigating the possibilities of agency of aesthetic experiences through *ludic media* – having, in this case, digital games as an object of study. Also, we intend to investigate the possibility of including a fourth axis/key to the proposed epistemological framework in the relationship between play and aesthetic experience, i.e., aesthetics and performance, given the approximation between this and the universe of ludic practices.

Moreover, we believe that academic research that relates essential topics to the field of game studies – in this case, the relationship between play and aesthetic experience, taking videogames as a particular object – is, in a way, something that is still little explored and which deserves attention, if what is desired is to better understand the effects of this *new media*⁸⁰ on its audience.

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79 RANCIÈRE, J.: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London : Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 562.

80 See: MANOVICH, L.: *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2001.

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