Anarchic Counterplay: Re-imagining Gameplay as an Act of Performative Resistance

Marleena Huuhka

This article introduces anarchic, performative counterplay as a way of creating spaces for new ways of being and playing in and with video games. Drawing from French theatre director and theoretician Antonin Artaud's work I will establish a base for counterplay as gratuitous performance, which has the potential to transform gameplay. I will discuss this theory through my observations on two case studies. The first arises from my solitary explorations in Minecraft, which was conducted as autoethnographic research. The second case study comprises of performances created in two different 'Performing gameplay' workshops.

Introduction

In this article I focus on performance as a mode of counterplay. Counterplay is usually used to describe emergent practices in (video) games that have not been thought of by the designers of that particular game.[1] I have previously discussed the frame of performance as a way of creating new counterplay practices.[2] In this article, to develop the theory of counterplay further, I have chosen to add anarchic to describe the relationship between the act of performative counterplay and the video game being played. Anarchy is thus an attitude, an approach, and performance is the method. Anarchic is understood in this article as 'lacking order, regularity, or definiteness',[3] thus anarchic attitude offers a way to see games free from imagined authorities. Further, the contemporary, intersectional anarchist attitude abandons ideals of universal, privileged, and hierarchic freedom as a goal, and looks to

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[1] See e.g. Nakamura and Wirman 2005; Apperley 2010; Meades 2015
[2] Huuhka 2019
[3] Merriam Webster n.d.

communities and rhizomes at the intersections as worth striving for.[4] This attitude is now more important than ever, as we deal with crisis of every nature – ecological, financial and those of violence. Video games are part of the media environment that trains us to want more, consume more and destroy more. Anarchic counterplay can offer a practice to resist these tendencies in our society and build rhizomes of coexistence during gameplay.

Performing, on stage or otherwise, and playing video games are in many ways similar activities.[5] They both come to existence through the body of the performer/player; happen only once in a specific moment and in a specific physical and/or virtual place; and they both are, at least to some extent, entertainment and/or art products made to be consumed by performers, players, and spectators. They both provide profit and financial value through the actual products as well as through related and surrounding business, such as restaurants and computer companies. Performing and playing are both experiences, corporeal actions that create and shape the world, both virtual and physical.

I will define anarchic, performative counterplay using French director and theatre theoretician Antonin Artaud's thoughts on theatre as a starting point. The aim is to build a practice-based theory of performance as a transformative force of resistance. As video games are a rapidly growing cluster of leisure, competition, labor, business, and pleasure, it is important to promote diverse ways of approaching and analyzing gameplay. The frame of performance has the possibility to show things otherwise left unnoticed. The frame of performance shifts the focus to different details, it makes irrelevant things matter.

Artaud had an idea of total theatre, and this idea of totality is here confronted with the totality and the partiality of gameplay. Gameplay, in video games in particular, engages the player both physically and mentally, both in reality and in the reality of the virtuality. These processes of engagement are often referred as immersion[6] or more recently as incorporation,[7] and are somewhat present in theatre as well, especially in so called immersive performances.[8] My hypothesis is that thinking of gameplay as performative changes the way individual actions are perceived. This article strives to find

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[4] Lazar 2018.

[5] Fernández-Vara, 2009; Huuhka 2020.

[6] Laurel 1991; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005.

[7] Calleja 2011.

[8] Immersive theatre refers to performances, in which the audience is in the center of the action, rather than in a separate auditorium. Often these performances include game-like choices. For more on the similarities between immersive theatre and video games, see Huuhka 2020.

out why these changes happen, and what is their relevance to gameplay as a broader concept. What are the things that performance as a frame, especially in the context of counterplay, uncovers?

The theoretical formulation is based on my observations on two case studies, which will be discussed briefly in this article.[9] The first arises from my solitary explorations in a building game called *Minecraft*,[10] which was conducted as autoethnographic research. The second case study comprises of my experiences from two different *Performing gameplay* workshops, in the University of Konstanz, Germany in 2017 (from now on workshop K) and in Tampere University, Finland in 2019 (from now on workshop T). In this case, the students produced performances in collaboration with non-human and material entities such as video games and game devices. I discuss their performances as well as my own experiences watching those performances. My method for doing research is practice as research, meaning that knowledge is produced through practice. Kershaw and Nicholson summarize as follows:

> Hence practice as research in the performing arts pursues hybrid enquiries combining creative doing with reflexive being, thus fashioning freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies.[11]

The knowledge produced through practice as research is thus corporeal and theoretical: in my research concrete practical experiments form the basis of potential new theoretical openings.

Anarchic counterplay stands for all mischievous acts of doing otherwise within a certain video game setting. It abandons all achievements and progress inside the game; it refuses to follow the narrative and opens a space of random interactions. In the following sections, I will first relate Artaud to with video games, then go through some practical examples close to anarchic counterplay, and finally, propose possibilities that could lead to anarchic counterplay.

Performance as a concept is in the center of this article, with a broad focus on artistic, theatrical, and social phenomenon, rather than the capacity or potential of technical devices (although this latter comparison might provide interesting readings of this article). I will follow performance researcher Erika Fischer-Lichte's thoughts on performance as a transformative force. Fischer-Lichte describes the power of performance as follows:

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[9] For more thorough accounts of these cases, see Huuhka 2019 and Huuhka 2021.
[10] Mojang Studios 2009.
[11] Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, 64.

> By transforming its participants, performance achieves the
> reenchantment of the world. The nature of performance as event –
> articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and
> spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emer-
> gence of meaning – enables such transformation.[12]

I examine video games through performance theory. First, we need to define
the concept, or rather the context, of game for this text. Video games are a
varied media, and there is no one set of norms or rules that could possibly
define all of them. As Ian Bogost has formulated: 'video games are a mess',[13]
and are accepted as theoretically hazy in this article. However, all games,
from big, popular publications to smaller scale indie titles operate through
a specific set of rules.[14] As this article deals with video games, all games dis-
cussed are subjected to the laws governing the workings of game devices
and algorithms. Further, the tactics suggested in this article are especially
relevant with popular video games that emphasize reaching certain goals.
Art games and avantgarde games can of course be counterplayed as well,
but the tactics proposed in this article might not bring out anything inter-
esting from games already positioned against the mainstream. To counter-
play artsier games one might need a different set of counterplay tactics.

As gameplay is engaging, real activity, it matters. Video games matter
to people: they matter to players, developers, financiers and profiters. They
form a considerable part of our digital culture today, a part that grows in
significance both culturally and financially. As such, any major cultural phe-
nomenon encounters countercultural forces and movements. Players en-
gage in various resistive practices, which are sometimes called counterplay[15]
or transgressive play.[16] These practices include, for example, positive or
neutral tactics such as playing slowly, non-violent play and taking ad-
vantages of potential mistakes in the game,[17] or more dire practices such as
trolling, bullying, and cheating.[18] This way counterplay is different from
counter-gaming,[19] in which players modify the actual code of the game. To
sum up, counterplay in this article means ways of playfully engaging and
messing with video games without altering the game in any way.

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[12] Fischer-Lichte 2008, 8.
[13] Bogost 2009.
[14] Salen and Zimmerman 2004.
[15] Apperley 2010; Nakamura and Wirman 2005; Meades 2015.
[16] Aarseth 2007.
[17] Nakamura and Wirman 2005; Apperley 2010.
[18] Meades 2015, 24.
[19] Galloway 2006.

Framing anarchic counterplay

Antonin Artaud's ideas of theatre serve as a starting point for anarchic counterplay. As all masterpieces, including Artaud's work, should be destroyed[20], I will not follow Artaud literally, but rather build my approach on Artaud's key notions. The purpose of the Theatre of Cruelty was, according to Artaud, anarchic destruction.[21] Joel White describes this process as follows:

> The task of the Theatre of Cruelty is to stimulate anarchic reflection, to produce a crisis in the system – anarchic destruction – so that Form can reach this critical point, collapse or be transformed. In other words, anarchic destruction is an energetic destruction of conformism.[22]

Anarchic destruction of conformism creates space and conditions for anarchic poetry to happen.[23] To apply this to anarchic counterplay, anarchic reflection serves as process that has the potential to demolish hierarchic structures of any kind within or related to games, and anarchist poetry or anarchist counterplay is what happens in the space revealed.

  As Artaud himself experienced, his ideal of theatre was (theatre of the) impossible and to some extent that might apply to anarchic counterplay as well.[24] Some of the possible actions might not be possible, or the outcome might be different than anticipated. However, this uncertainty is part of the fun: anarchic counterplay operates on its own ever-changing rules. What I take from Artaud is the attitude towards norms and structures. What Artaud did to theatre can, to some extent, be done to games as well. Social constructions might change with time, but every era creates new restrictive norms that need to be broken. In this article, these norms are those of gameplay. By this, I mean both the rules that are given to play the game, both through coding and instructions, as well as norms that affect how a certain game should be played.

  To delve deeper into resistance practices, I will start with Artaud's notion of theatre/performance as gratuitous. Artaud writes in his essay *Theatre and the Plague* as follows:

> The scum of the populace, immunized so it seems by their frantic greed, enter the open houses and help themselves to riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. At this point, theatre establishes itself.

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[20] Artaud 1966.

[21] *ibid.*, 70.

[22] White 2018, 100.

[23] *ibid.*, 101.

[24] Finter 2004.

> Theatre, that is to say momentary pointlessness which drives them to useless acts without immediate profit.[25]

Artaud uses a plague-ridden city as an example of the significance of theater, or performance as it would be understood today. Performance is gratuitous in the sense that it does not serve any purpose outside itself, nor does it not produce any value. The gratuitousness of performance is especially relevant when we compare it with gameplay. Gameplay as such can be gratuitous, but there are cases when it is not, for example when games are played professionally, or they produce for example social acceptance or capital. Gratuitousness is however present if gameplay is seen as a purely pleasure-producing activity for the individual doing it. Gameplay as an activity does not produce any added value, the possible value comes from the context and structures surrounding it: it can, for example, produce social capital in the player community, or financial profit through different settings, such as esports or streaming.

If we look at gameplay as performance another layer of gratuitousness is added: the rules and structures that have been responsible for the goals of the game are removed. Gameplay is thus stripped of its internal value production. Let us say the aim of the game has been to collect as many diamonds as possible during a certain time frame. If/when this action is denied, inner capital of the game is no longer produced. The gameplay thus transforms gratuitous through performance, it becomes deliberate action against itself. Artaud's idea of theatre would tear down the walls between performance and reality. In video games the actions might be located only in the virtual worlds, however breaches do happen. For example, various tactics of bullying, trolling and griefing described by Meades wreak havoc in online games causing distress that passes from one world to the other.[26] Another example could be gamers dying while playing: all the real and virtual money and fame is rendered useless as the compulsory gameplay gradually destroys the player.[27]

A game, by definition has rules and some sort of an object, some goal the player(s) are trying to achieve.[28] This is also somewhat the case in the modes of counterplay suggested by Rika Nakamura and Hanna Wirman and Tom Apperley. For example, Apperley gives an example of gold farming, in which bots or human labor are used to farm resources for other

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[25] Artaud 1970, 15.
[26] Meades 2015.
[27] Conti 2015.
[28] Salen and Zimmerman 2004.

players.[29] In 'Girlish Counterplay Tactics',[30] Nakamura and Wirman try out different ways of playing, for example slowly or without using violence, to see if it is possible to complete the game with those tactics. In these examples of counterplay the aim is still to somehow finish the game or at least play the game, whereas in anarchic counterplay success is irrelevant. The game itself becomes a performer in the shared experience, and thus ceases to be something that could be completed. The game becomes, or rather performs, as a material entity alongside other involved parties, such as the human performers, other material participants such as game devices. Freeing counterplay from connotations of advancement, success, and achievements, allows counterplay to be seen as transformative and gratuitous action. Performative, anarchic counterplay abandons achievements, progress and winning. This basis separates it from counterplay suggested by previous research. The focus is no longer on the outcome or content of the game, but rather on the separate actions conducted by the player/performer.

Artaud was drawn to 'oriental' theatre. For example, Balinese theatre inspired him, especially the states of ecstasy and trance achieved during performances.[31] These attributes point to immersive experiences, towards the realness of performance. This approach can be somewhat paralleled with the concept of immersion in video games. However, the aim to immersion is not important, rather the opposite. In gameplay immersion is often strived for, and in that manner, an Artaudian approach to gaming would be against immersion, against institutionalized practices. This resistance against set practices is in the center of anarchic counterplay, and thus the link between Artaud and contemporary counterplay practice. Spyros Papaioannou suggests that

> we address the 'politics of the real', which bears less relation to mimesis as absence, than to experience as presence; we become more attentive to the ways in which a theatrical event is perceived – that is, to its condition of possibility – rather than to its represented object, its 'hidden meaning', or its mimetic realism.[32]

Performative, anarchic counterplay is about experiencing the changes in the dynamics of the game in that specific moment. This means that it is truly mostly about presence. The content or intended, narrative meaning of the performance does not matter. The performative counterplay suggested in this article means performative practices done in order to rearrange,

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[29] Apperley 2010, 139-140.
[30] Nakamura and Wirman 2005
[31] Bermel 2013, 16.
[32] Papaioannou 2018, 16.

reimagine and deconstruct original game spaces, game practices and game environments. By using performance as a tool and viewpoint, social, virtual and machinic structures guiding/limiting gameplay become visible. Performative counterplay offers a way of looking at gameplay from a new perspective. Performative counterplay aims to shift and undermine inherent hierarchies. It provides a toolset that chooses not to comply with the rules, social nor game related, and to obey the rules of a different type of happening.

In the examples that provide the material for this theoretical formulation, it becomes clear that a shift in perspective allows for a shift in practices. For this approach to work, it is necessary to change what and how players interact with video games, or perhaps during the process they stopped being players all together. Positions are fluid, but the important notion is that a shift in action is also a shift in position, and thus, at least a shift in a temporary identity. When the practice changes, when the actions change, they lose their meaning in the original context. The same actions that previously helped the player to do something, are now doing the opposite for the performer, underachieving at least in the eyes of the game. However, as this underachievement turns into performance, it turns into undermining the basis of what it is. Counterplay is actions, it is actions against the logic of the game, and actions for the logic or unlogic of the performance. Counterplay turns things around, it shows details that would otherwise be left unnoticed. Most importantly it shows us the schemes that game cultures operate by. Achieving by underachieving. Performing by underperforming. And all this with a playful attitude. The attitude of not accepting norms, of not accepting rules, of not accepting – except the outlines offered by performance as an action. As theatrical performance is the frame, anarchic counterplay is positioned between two different art forms, something physical and something virtual.

Anarchic counterplay in action

What could anarchic counterplay actually be? In this section, I present some possible nudges towards its actualization. The Artaudian context differs immensely from contemporary theatre and especially video games, as they exist in media unknown to Artaud or his contemporaries. Video games operate partly on the plane of virtual and partly on the plane of bodily interactions and are thus hard to fit in with the concept Artaudian performance. Artaud was set against the theatre scene of his own time, and I on the other hand, am working with media that did not exist during Artaud's

time. The principle however remains the same: performance emerges from disruption.

As Artaud was a sort of a reformer, it would be false to try to follow his practice now, some one hundred years later. Artaud himself has been canonized, and as all masterpieces must be destroyed, the same applies to Artaud as well. I do not follow his exact propositions or ideas. Rather, Artaud functions as an inspiration to resistant practices that are unearthed from my experiments and workshops K and T. Artaud was against the status quo of his time, and in the same way performative, anarchic counterplay sets itself against the status quo of contemporary gameplay and performance practices. There are of course alternative practices operating already in both fields, and this article does not minimize their importance. However, those practices, as resistance is by nature, are always in the minority.

Performances are discussed here as actions and as processes rather than as products or results. As Papaioannou writes:

> Artaud understands the notion of cruelty not as a static condition, but rather as a process or a 'becoming' through which every human or non-human element of the performance acquires an agential drive by being exposed to the centre of the event.[33]

Counterplay as performance is produced by processes involving various entities of human and non-human status. Together these entities create actions that gain their relevance as parts of processes happening during any given moment. In other words, the counterplay performances do not strive to produce anything outside themselves. There is no gain or relevance, especially in relation to gameplay as goal-oriented action.

Artaud sees theatre as a way to experience life lived passionately. This experience can also be achieved through war, drugs, crime, or insurrection. To avoid these destructive things, theatre is necessary.[34] Similar things have been said about video games as well: they are a way to release aggression and manage negative feelings.[35] Video game immersion is more lifelike compared to other entertainment or art forms, and thus the experiences are more powerful.[36] PlayStation 3 invited players with the slogan 'This is living!', suggesting the gaming experience to be lifelike.[37]

Gaming as such it might produce Artaudian feelings or spaces of existence, but that is not enough to define anarchic counterplay. Anarchic

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[33] Papaioannou 2018, 11.
[34] Bermel 2013, 15.
[35] Lee, Kim, and Choi 2021.
[36] Väliaho 2014.
[37] PlayStation 2014.

counterplay must be against the norms of its subject, and in the case of immersive games or gameplay, it must be set against immersion, or at the very least direct the immersion away from the game world and gameplay experience. This act of denial of purpose is related to the Theatre of Cruelty. It does not destroy the game as an object, physical or virtual, but rather gives new meanings to the content of the game. Thus, the gratuitousness of actions also allows for the transformation of gameplay to something different.

Anarchic counterplay might happen when something completely unrelated to gameplay happens. Artaud's theatre was still theatre, so anarchic counterplay can still have elements of gameplay. The central question is whether the purpose of the action has changed. And if it has changed, if that is due to performance as a frame? Could it be that performance as a frame transforms gameplay into anarchic counterplay? Especially in the workshops K and T framing the actions as performance gave significance to otherwise neglected details. For example, the materiality of the console and the game itself might not be in the center when playing the game as intended, unless there is some technical issue or problem. However, when framed as performance the technological performance or lack of it becomes significant. There were, for example, some failures that were read as intentional parts of the performance by the other participants of the workshop.

What might prove problematic to actual anarchic counterplay is the demand of gratuitousness. For example, the performances created in the workshops were course assignments, and thus in no way gratuitous. Even if the content and way of conducting those performances were up to the students, the motivation for doing those performances came from outside. In exchange for making those performances students received five credits. Even though the performances were not the result of intrinsic motivation, they were created to be performed once. As said, for the students doing them was a way to earn credits, and to me as a facilitator and a researcher, seeing them being created was a way of acquiring knowledge. My wanderings in *Minecraft* were also motivated by my curiosity and a will to produce knowledge. So, in many ways these particular performances were not gratuitous at all. Maybe the way to pass this is to see these performances as a phase towards gratuitous, anarchic counterplay.

One way of interpreting Artaud's call to end all masterpieces in the game context, is to exclude the content of the game from analysis. This would mean both the narrative content as well as the rules or guidelines of that specific game. In other words, the rules and stories would not matter. The other option is to consider narratives and rules as the masterpieces that must be, if not destroyed, at least approached as fuel for counterplay. By

this I mean that if counterplay sets itself against the rules of the games, it must not be the goal of the action. Otherwise, the structure meant to be criticized will gain importance. Following this line of thought, narratives and rules should be considered equal material for counterplay, in comparison to, for example, the performers' shoes. A counterplay performance, in an Artaudian context, should not be about what it is trying to challenge. The performances and knowledge production, let us say the science of it, must somehow be conceptually separated, at least if we want to pursue 'the gratuitous'. On the other hand, if we scale back and see the whole package as part of the education system, in that context those actions might start to appear gratuitous after all.

Next, I will go through some findings from two case studies. I will identify details that construct what I understand to be anarchic counterplay. These details include practices that defy the logic of the game, deny the purpose of the game, and shift the focus from virtual to physical.

Wandering in Minecraft

For my first case study I wandered aimlessly in the virtual world of *Minecraft*.[38] What started as random experimenting became my first venture into performative counterplay. Wandering is understood here as autoethnographic practice. Autoethnography produces knowledge on specific experiences rather than makes empirical claims. Researchers position in the center of various assemblages is acknowledged.[39] Further, as my framing for those explorations and wanderings was that of performance, they entangle with the concept of performative autoethnography.[40] Tami Spry argues that 'performative-I autoethnography' strives to identify stereotypes and socially constructed categories and performances, and

> interrupts these performances with autoethnographies that critique homogenizing categories and the power structures that uphold them, and offer alternatives to dominant and often oppressive ways of being.[41]

In *Minecraft*, the player is encouraged to explore and build whatever they desire from blocks, which represent any material imaginable. There are also fights with animals and monsters, and the possibility to complete quests. I chose to play the game on peaceful mode, which meant all the possible

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[38] For a more thorough account of these experiments, see Huuhka 2019.
[39] Adams et al. 2015, 21–22.
[40] Spry 2016.
[41] *ibid.*, 35.

threats were gone. This allowed me to focus on my virtual presence instead of trying to survive. In framed my actions as solitary performances: my physical body and my avatar body were performing to each other as well as to the virtual environment. My actions in *Minecraft* were gentle, ranging from aimlessly wandering around to standing still. At the time I labelled it as counterplay, building on the previously mentioned Nakamura & Wirman and Apperley, focusing on the unexpected actions I could find.

'Anarchic' might have aggressive connotations, but for example, in this case anarchic actions stemmed from tranquillity. As video games tend to be – in most cases – filled with fast and often violent actions, resistance can easily be observed in silence and slowness. Another anarchic feature would be the denial of the offered narratives all together. In a building game, which emphasizes creativity, the biggest act of resistance is to refuse to build, refuse to create. These refusals follow the logic of performative autoethnography offering alternatives to dominant gameplay strategies.

Findings from workshops

Workshop K was a part of Theoretical Media and Arts Studies Spring School in the University of Konstanz, Germany in Spring 2017. It was my first my venture into facilitating video game performances. Based on the experiences of workshop K I devised a workshop course for the Internet and Game Studies program in the University of Tampere, Finland in Spring 2019. In workshop K the participants were mostly media studies students, and in workshop T majority came from game studies.

The aim of workshops K and T was to explore the concept of performance in relation to video games and gameplay in general. In workshop K there were two separate assignments: 'make a performance with video games' and 'make a performance with video games and break the rules'. In workshop T there were four separate 'make a performance with video games' assignments. Each had a specific emphasis: 're-imagination of classic,' 'non-human performers', 'pixels as audience', and 'break the rules'. As there were altogether thirty-one performances in workshops K and T,[42] the contents and forms were highly diverse. Not everything could be described as counterplay, let alone anarchic counterplay. There were, however, certainly moments that were transformative and anarchic.

One issue that is present in such performance workshops is the unspoken need to entertain the audience. Audience laughing is easily interpreted

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[42] For more on workshops K and T, see Huuhka 2021.

as a sign of success, and that was visible in some of the performances. As the students came from game, media, or literary studies, most of them had no ready concept for this type of workshop, although this changed during the course of the workshops. As the students gained more experience in performing and making performances, their productions got bolder. Of course, the presence of teacher authority, mine that is, was looming over everything, even though I tried to stress my position as a facilitator rather than teacher. As mentioned, this poses a problem for the requirement of gratuitousness.

However, if we look at the individual performances, gratuitous actions were present. For example, in workshop K there was a performance, where the performers played a level of *Lego Harry Potter* [43] on Xbox with the screen turned off. They were talking as they knew what they were doing, even though they were probably unable to even enter the game without seeing the interface. Here is something utterly useless and extremely performative: refusing the visual sensation of gameplay and performing bodily actions that produce nothing, the *as if* of gameplay. This resulted in a performance that took little to no interest in the audience, an aspect that adds to its anarchic tendencies. I had the feeling that this performance stemmed out of not really knowing what to do, and that obliviousness produced anarchic counterplay.

In workshop T, last performance assignment was to break all the rules of gameplay. Many of the groups chose to break social rules.[44] Games have, as any other human activity, social codes of conduct, that in some cases might even overpower the operational, written rules. They are what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call implicit rules.[45] Thus, rules in games are both prewritten and emergent. As Jesper Juul writes '[rules provide] a basic aspect of the player experience: that different games yield different kinds of [motivating] experiences'.[46] Disrupting the social norms during performance was interesting, as it emphasized the strict etiquette involved in gameplay. Examples were criticizing the other player for their gameplay and touching the screen, and thus leaving a fingerprint on it. In one particularly interesting performance the performers played *Mario Kart* [47] on Nintendo. One of the performers drove the wrong way, which the game continuously corrected; one slept on the floor; and one left their controller, went to get coffee, and then ate biscuits someone outside our group had left in the

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[43] Electronic Arts 2010.
[44] Disrespecting good taste was also mentioned.
[45] Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 130.
[46] Juul 2005.
[47] Nintendo 1996.

room. The biscuits were especially interesting, as they extended the space of the performance to include an outsider's snacks – in a true anarchist spirit of sharing. Even though it might be argued that these examples only demonstrate rude behaviour, it is valuable to expose the social structures surrounding gameplay. All these things became acceptable within the frame of performance: thus, performance truly is transformative. As Artaud did in theatre, here counterplay tears down the social codes of gameplay. Performative counterplay reveals hidden motivations, and thus opens up space for doing otherwise. It can be, as with the biscuits, something funny that nevertheless rocks the status quo: anarchic, performative counterplay reveals that doing otherwise is possible.

Now looking back at the solo explorations and the workshops, they produced several types of actions. It can be noted that the intensity and maybe even the intentionality of the actions increased. In the solo expeditions in *Minecraft* there was an atmosphere of wondering and just testing things, while during the workshops, especially the second one, I already had an idea of the possible outcome. This does not mean that the performances produced followed some set guidelines, but the aura of mystery had vanished. The biggest difference is the number of performers and audience involved. The amount of people obviously shapes the outcome and affects the content and especially the duration of the performance.

Imagining the anarchic

Moving from past to future: what could a truly anarchic counterplay practice be like? Could it be acts of everyday resistance suggested by Michel De Certeau[48] or Artaudian destruction, or maybe both? During the previous section, I gave some examples of how anarchic counterplay might be manifested. However, all these examples were spontaneous, meaning that while the performers, me or the students in workshops K and T, had specific intentions behind their actions, those intentions did not aim to produce anarchic counterplay. What could deliberate anarchic counterplay be like? What kind of practices would be possible?

If we think that one of Artaud's main themes is the destruction of rigid structures and hierarchies, then the first aim is to locate those in the games played. I would argue that these structures have to do with playability,

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[48] De Certeau 1984.

narrative, and the goals of the game.[49] Anarchic counterplay would then be
identifying them and creating processes that undermine them. In the game-
play context this would mean forgetting the rules and the content of the
game. Game and gameplay would be stripped down to actions, which could
also be challenged by, for example, refusing to do them. I believe one way
of creating anarchic counterplay practices is to approach video games and
game devices as purely material entities. I believe that looking at (video)
games through their materiality would allow us better to see what playing
(video) games does to our perception of the world. Games are a fitting ex-
ample of how different agents produce meanings together, even though
these meanings might get lost under the visual and sensual overload often
caused by games. Anarchic counterplay has the potential to emphasize dif-
ferent materialities, as the *Harry Potter* example from workshop K shows.

In *Utopia as Performance* Jill Dolan suggests that live performance offers
a space in which people can come together to create different, better world.[50]
I believe this is also possible during gameplay, and in this case especially
during moments of counterplay. Dolan writes:

> [- -] moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly
> transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection, spring
> from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual
> confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a dif-
> ferent, putatively better future.[51]

Anarchic, performative counterplay can be a tool of building utopistic per-
formance/game spaces, and as such expanding those communities beyond
game worlds. By denying obvious purposes players can create space for
something new, for diverse ways of existing in this world and possibly dis-
cover new ways of dealing with the burning world by making new connec-
tions with both human and non-human peers. As Riku Roihankorpi has
written, for Artaud

> demonstrations of anarchic ethics are not political activity per se, but
> performances of a must that—queerly, and cathartically, because the
> must itself urges to voice that which is powerless in representations—

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[49] To be clear, I am talking about the mainstream games and their general features.
There are many games that already break these structures. However, these kinds
of games are not the topic of this article, as counterplaying them would require
totally different strategies.
[50] Dolan 2005, 2.
[51] *ibid*. 168.

inhabits the social life as a double, as something that is detached from but concerns its actuality.[52]

Performative, anarchic counterplay can reframe known structures, and I believe this applies to both games and performances. Video game performances do disturb the notion of performance or rather theatre as something related to only human presence. The aim is thus to disturb all hierarchies – those of games as well as theatres. Video games as performance are paving new ways of both performing and playing, and I believe anarchic counterplay is one useful tool in defining this new artform.

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52 Roihankorpi 2020, 147.

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