

# Player 2: Don't Press Start

## « Secondary Players » and « In-Person » Game Spectatorship Practices

### ABSTRACT

Since arcade gaming, video games are watched as much as they are played. Following the rise of live streaming, game spectatorship has become an increasingly popular topic in game studies. Drawing upon the firsts results of an ongoing field research, this paper aims to explore a specific form of game spectatorship: observing a *physically present* player control the game. Through the qualitative analysis of interviews and game sessions, it will try and determine how this particular practice reshapes our understanding of « fun » and « play », and how it challenges the role of interactivity for gameplay fun.

### Keywords

secondary player, proxy playing, game spectatorship

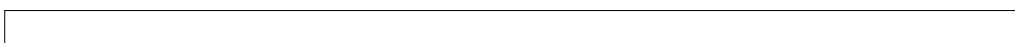
### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

According to Henriot (1969) and Bateson (1955), play is a dialectical operation that requires a « distanced », « metacommunicative » attitude. Built among others on the free interpretation of the rules, this distance between the game and the player gives the latter « the necessary space of freedom [...] to make it [the game] its own and then to become the designer of its own playful experience »<sup>1</sup> (Bonenfant, 2015 : 81). Beyond commonly discussed gameplay practices, this paper aims to focus on specific situations where the potential « player » is put at a distance from the game — not even behind the controller, but rather *watching somebody else play*.

Game spectatorship is hardly new, as it was already a common experience since the emergence of arcade gaming: « watching others play — whether attending tournaments, bars or arcades in person, or simply watching others in between turns at the controls — has arguably always been an integral, albeit understudied, part of gaming culture (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Lin & Chuen-Tsai, 2011; Taylor, 2012) » (Taylor, Szablewicz, Bowman, Harper, 2013).

This phenomenon can take multiple forms, from sharing the controller with one's sibling or friend in front of the family TV screen (acting alternatively as « pilot » and « copilot »), or having fun while watching our favorite live streaming videos on Twitch, to guiding or « tutoring » a less skilled player. Besides, the same user can switch from one role to the other in a single game session — when the end of an in-game action leads to a cut-scene, for example. But beyond their apparent diversity, these gameplay practices share one characteristic in common: the presence of another « layer » between the game and its users, which challenges our own definitions of playing — as well as our relationship to the media.

As some of these practices, such as live streaming (Gandolfini, 2016; Sjöblom and Hamari, 2017; Taylor, 2018; etc.), are already being investigated, this paper will focus on a particular and complementary form of game spectatorship: watching another, *physically present* player control the game. Far from being non-participating



observers, these onlookers can be actively engaged with the game (through communicating with the principal player, for example), or emotionally involved. As already stated by Newman in 2002 :

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

But if secondary players can have *fun* while watching, can we call it *playing*? How do these practices reshape or transgress the usual frame of the game? What pleasures can only be reached by interacting with the game, and which ones remain accessible through watching? Playing *through somebody else* thus challenges our own definitions of playing, and the importance we give to the notion of interactivity in particular. Moreover, it puts the concept of *fun* into perspective: for several players we interviewed, these practices are *fun* because they allow them to « transgress » the usual frame of the game. One respondent described that feeling while playing *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) with friends:

*Until Dawn* is initially a solo game, you switch from one character to another [...] but we were four players sharing the controller, each time the character changed, we would give the controller to someone else [...]. It was really fun to see other people’s choices [...] because I probably wouldn’t have done the same things [...]. It’s really great to be able to transgress the rules, knowing that the game is offering you an experience where you switch from one character to another [...] and here we decided to say ‘no’, we are going to play each our own character.

For many players, these practices are also a way to live a gaming experience they couldn’t access otherwise, to cross their own limits, to « hack the play », in a sense — for example, by putting some distance back between them and the game when the content is too involving. Horror games are a typical example: several respondents explained that the only way they can « play » a horror game is by giving the controller (temporarily or for the whole session) to another player. One of them described his experience with *Friday the 13th: The Game* (IllFonic, 2017):

It’s the kind of game where I prefer to watch than play, for example. Because that game is incredibly stressful and scary, and there is a claustrophobic vibe to it, I play one session, two sessions, three sessions and then I can’t take it anymore [...] I like to watch because [...] you can observe all the characters, you can go like « ooh, there he is », it’s more fun, because there is an additional distance that allows me to appreciate the game a bit more, in a sense [...]

This paper has a double purpose. Our first goal is to shed some light on not only understudied, but also frequently understated playful experiences. Whereas other game spectatorship practices have become more and more popular over the years, sitting next to another player and watching her play is often ignored or disregarded, be it in the media, the industry or the audience itself. Our primary objective is thus to access the diversity of secondary players’ experiences without reducing them to the stereotypes (« the less skilled player », « the girlfriend », etc.) commonly associated to this particular role. Our second objective is to try and determine how this particular practice reshapes our understanding of « fun » and « play », and how it challenges the role of interactivity for gameplay fun. Finally, this study is also inseparable from its scientific context, as it cultivates deep connections with previous and contemporary works on other forms on game spectatorship; more particularly, the growing literature on live streaming will be extensively taken into account.

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<sup>1</sup> Our own translation from : « l'espace de liberté nécessaire [...] afin [...] de le faire sien et devenir alors créateur de sa propre expérience ludique ».