BREAKOUT –Thinking outside the box

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Introduction

In this paper I will, through metaphorical use of the computer game *Breakout* (Atari Inc., 1976), try to outline some of the breakdowns, breakouts, and breakthroughs that my research has been exposed to during the first half of my PhD-project. This is done partly to illuminate the fact that what we emphasize in our research and, conversely, what we ignore will make all the difference in what the research area will 'mean' to us. Indicating that our individual and collective habits of grasping the meaning of anything will determine how it stands forth for us. And partly done to explicate how being *forced* to think outside the box can lead from breakdown to breakout and finally to breakthrough in relation to ones research project and areas.

Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Breakout* (Atari Inc., 1976)

Breakout

Firstly, I will give a short presentation of the metaphorical framework; the computer game *Breakout*. In the computer game *Breakout*, originally from 1976, rows of colored bricks are lined on the top of the computer screen and are destroyed when hit by a ball. In the bottom of the screen there is a paddle, which the computer player is given control over and is able to steer

from side to side. Between paddle and wall the ball travels back and forth, rebounding of the walls and destroying bricks as the player tries to keep the ball 'airborne' using his paddle. If the player fails and the ball transcend the bottom of the screen the player will lose a life. So the player steers his paddle the best he can, from side to side, in an attempt to keep his ball airborne as he slowly but tenaciously destroys the brick wall that is keeping him from progressing to the next level (where he will encounter another layout of bricks comprising yet another wall).

The above presentation of the computer game *Breakout* is actually a quite accurate description of my scholarly work on the player's corporeal, digital, and communicative interaction in computer games.

A well-lit blind spot: The invalidation of novelty

But in reality, I should be doing something else. In reality, I should be analyzing the discourse and communication of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) gamers playing together in groups and guilds. I should be doing conversational analysis and writing articles on the syntactical structure, the semantic meaning, and pragmatic use of gamers' communication while they raid, quest, and hang out in Massively Multiplayer Online Games. But instead, I find myself consistently writing and talking about the bodily experience of gaming, the fingers 'sensuous feel' of the game, the quality and meaning of hand- and finger-movements, the rhythm of gaming, and the deeply meaningful corporeal practice of gamers. How did this come to pass?

My PhD project is originally entitled 'To practice language in computer games: Why and How' and was launched at 1st of March 2009. My PhD project is thus on paper a project that should be offering insights into communication forms and language-practices amongst computer players in Massively Multiplayer Online Games like *World of Warcraft*, by conceptualizing, analyzing, and interpreting the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic layers of language-practice. The first half year of the project I was exactly trying to do that by attending PhD-courses and presenting my project under headings such as 'The Day the Chat Stood Still: The Practice of Language in *World of Warcraft*' and 'Enter Action: A Multi-Facetted Analysis of Communication in *World of Warcraft*'. But I kept getting the same responses from some of the senior lecturers: "Why was I trying to do something that had already been done?" or "Why was I claiming that my perspective was novel when there in fact had been done numerous research articles and projects on the language in computer games?" At first I tried to

validate the novelty of my project by pointing to the theoretical frameworks I was going to use and by arguing for the newness of the perspective I was seeing computer players language practice under.

But I couldn't break through and make them see what I was seeing – and by the end of the first half year I was kind of worn down feeling my project was breaking down.

Pointing in the wrong direction: The self-destruction of my project

Simultaneously, I was doing my preliminary fieldwork where I was observing my brother partake in high end raiding with his guild in *World of Warcraft* while I was saving the guild's textual and verbal communication, capturing the guild's in-game interaction and making video recordings of my brother's interaction with a camera. One evening, contemplating the invalidation of the novelty of my project while trying to capture the essence of in-game communication practices with my video camera, my mind started wandering and I accidently and carelessly moved the camera's viewpoint causing my project to self-destruct. Below is a rendering of that night's subsequent entry in my fielddiary:

> *This evening when watching my brother raid with his high-end raiding guild in* World of Warcraft, *I accidently happened to shift the camera's viewpoint and my vision from the in-game, on-screen interaction to his 'raiding hands.' In a flash, I suddenly envisioned the entire raiding group sitting at their individual material interfaces with their fingers dancing on the keys, their mice moving in skating-like patterns while rhythmic waves of key-taps and mouse-clicks ascended as a kind of corporeally orchestrated music. From then on, I could no longer view their raid-communication as purely 'conversational', 'meaning-making,' or 'a certain kind of discourse'. From then on, their communication was just as much a symphonic coordination of their individual and mutual corporeal action. Their gaming practice acquired a corporeal layer, where the gamers simultaneously played their own individual rhythmic part and flowed with the polyrhythm of the group.*

And this corporeal dimension also found its way into my view on their communicative practices, as I from then on couldn't help seeing their raiding-communication as constantly reflecting upon, responding to,

requesting, and coordinating the actions of their moving, tool-wielding bodies.

The Gamer Game: The hegemony of tradition

So actually, it was not as much the senior lecturers questionings that caused the breakdown of my project, as it was my own subversion of the project as I moved the camera's viewpoint and subsequently my own perspective on communication in computer games. I became conscious about the fact that in order to understand the communication and virtual interaction *in the game*, I needed to understand the corporeal engagement *with the game*. Only then would I be able to faithfully grasp the significance of their communicative practices. So, I began extensively and intensively to traverse the research literature on gamers and gaming for theoretical, analytical and methodological frameworks with a corporeal perspective that I could use as the underlying basis for my descriptions of their communicative practices.

Through this wide-ranging and all-embracing examination of the literature on gamers and gaming, six recurrent views quickly began to surface, which I will shortly introduce in the following.

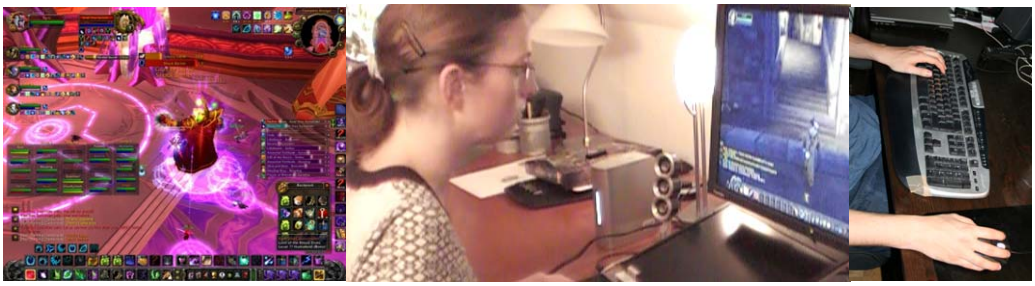

Fig. 2: Screenshot from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), the player of *World of Warcraft*, and the playing hands of *World of Warcraft*.

What the six general research positions within game research has in common is that they are all focused on the first two of the above frames, while generally being ignorant of the third. Hence, the player is generally framed as an in-game entity, as cultural and social situated (in- and out-side the game), as a thinking, communicating or perceiving recipient or as someone involved in identity construction or negotiation. Accordantly with this the gaming activity is, with *World of Warcraft* as metaphorical framework, described either as a 'World of Communitcraft,' a 'World of Gamecraft,' a 'World of Mindcraft,' a 'World of Wordcraft,' a 'World of Eyecraft,' or a 'World of Identitycraft.':

- **World of Communitycraft:** The first pervading stance within game research views players as community members and the gaming experience as a social and cultural activity. Players are characterized by their cultural and social processes of being enculturated into in-game communities with certain norms, values, and practices of accruing or losing social and cultural capital and so forth. Hence, players are described as someone involved in what could be labeled a 'World of Communitycraft'
- **World of Gamecraft:** The second stance views players as in-game avatars and the gaming experience as a virtual, in-game activity. Players are characterized by their virtual embodiment and in-game practices of picking up the game's virtual affordances, being involved in virtual interaction, identity- and role-play and so forth. Hence, players are described as someone involved in a 'World of Gamecraft'
- **World of Mindcraft:** The third stance views players as intentional, cognitive learners and the gaming experience is accordingly viewed as a cognitive, learning activity. Players are characterized by their cognitive processes and learning practices of interpretation, meaning-making, intentional systemic thinking, distributed cognition and cooperative learning. Hence, players are described as someone involved in a 'World of Mindcraft'
- **World of Wordcraft:** The fourth stance views players as communicators and the gaming experience as a communicative activity where players are characterized by their practices of discourse and communication, narrative re-framings, communicative displays of cognition, knowledge, culture, power, identity and suchlike. Hence, players are described as someone involved in a 'World of Wordcraft'
- **World of Eyecraft:** The fifth stance views players as visual perceivers and the gaming experience as a perceptual activity where gamers are characterized by their perceptual processes of gaining professional vision and their practices of receiving, scanning and decoding the visual representation or simulation and its visual affordances. Hence, players are described as someone involved in a 'World of Eyecraft'
- **World of Identitycraft:** The sixth and final stance views players as 'persons' and the gaming experience as an identity constructing activity, where players are characterized by their gender, race and age, their socially and culturally situatedness, as embodying a certain

culture and identity online and offline which they negotiate and construct. Hence, players are described as someone involved in a 'World of Identitycraft'

Breakout: Finding a 'blind spot': World of Handcraft

Given the obvious locomotory complexity of computer games like *World of Warcraft* it is noteworthy that none of the above research stances or numerous research articles on *World of Warcraft* are in any way occupied with the significance of corporeality, corporeal interaction, or locomotion in relation to computer games in general or *World of Warcraft* in particular, even though the game manifest itself through:

- ⇨ Constantly shifting corporeal interaction patterns (e.g. new spells, new interface layouts, or new action schemas)
- ⇨ High demands regarding corporeal performance (e.g. in raids, instances, or arena battles)
- ⇨ Alternating rhythmic patterns and paces (e.g. slowly traversing the landscape compared to engaging in frantic high-end raids)
- ⇨ High requirements for corporeal orchestrated interaction amongst players gaming together in groups

Just to name a few dimensions. All this is passed over in silence. Which is kind of odd given the fact that the much debated concepts of 'interactivity' and 'agency' generally is put forward as the hallmarks of the gaming experience.

Instead corporeality, corporeal interaction and locomotion are framed as initial learning difficulties quickly mastered and overcome or as trivial, ergonomic matters of gaining muscle memory, fast reflexes, and good hand-eye-coordination. So even though the corporeal dimension of gaming as a 'World of Handcraft' is a genuine 'blind spot' in game research, it is persistently ignored as either being 'something else' (not an *actual* part of the gaming experience) or as being 'nothing in itself' (not a *significant* part of the gaming experience) – The result being an overall absence of core terms, theoretical, analytical, and methodological frameworks that would enable us to grasp corporeality and locomotion in games as something in and of itself. In this way even though game research cannot deny the existence of the player's body and movement, it can deny the existence of any experiential value residing there.

So, although my claim about corporeality and locomotion in gaming being a 'blind spot' in game research was generally accepted within the research community, it was simultaneously dismissed as a purely trivial, mechanical, insignificant, or initial concern. Corporeality and locomotion are only trifling questions concerning the mechanistic encoding of the input-devices functionality and lay-out into the gamers body. Or trifling questions concerning the neuromuscular, ergonomic development of hand-eye coordination, reflexes, muscle memory and manual dexterity pertaining only to the initial process of learning to master, overcome and transcend the material interface and the mechanical body. Then, corporeality and corporeal locomotion can successfully be left behind to grind away outside the game as the player unfolds his gaming experience freely and detached in the digital gameworld.

Hence, I had made a breakout from tradition and found myself a blind spot but I was once again facing an approaching breakdown of my perspective. Only this time I was determined to make my perspective break through rather than break down. I just had to find the right 'power-ups' to break through the walls and destroy the brickwork of the long-lasting 'hegemony of appropriateness' within game research. I just had to find a way to make them *feel* the corporeality and locomotion of gaming as something qualitative, significant and meaningful in and of itself.

Let the fingers do the walking: Sensing something (a)new

The first thing I found to make my project break through and make the research community acknowledge my perspective and see, or more accurately 'feel', that there was something there, was through attempting to make lyrical, sensitive, and sensuous descriptions of the corporeality and locomotion in gaming. In this way I was able explicate what I meant when I was talking about corporeality and locomotion as qualitative, meaningful and significant dimensions of gaming in there own right and thus prevent them from instinctively being recast as subcategories of community, in-game virtuality, cognition, communication, learning, visuality, or identity. As well as avert the rejection of corporeality and locomotion as trivial, mechanical, insignificant, or only initial aspects of the gaming experience.

I will give one short example of such a description below. It is a description of an 'accidental' observation of my 6 year old daughter playing the bull-running Flash-game *Extreme Pamplona* (Sure Men, 2007) – But one

could probably make similar descriptions of playing *Breakout* or arena battles in *World of Warcraft*. *Extreme Pamplona* is a very simple 2 dimensional 'obstacle' game where you steer your avatar using the arrow-keys and jump using the spacebar while you try to stay ahead of a stampeding bull running behind you:

> *I was passing my 6 year old daughter's doorway on my way to fetch some coffee, when my attention got caught by a chanting murmuring. I silently slipped my head into the room and saw her playing a Flash-Game called Power Pamplona on her laptop. Her body was bent over the keyboard and her eyes were intently focused but at the same time hypnotized and distant. Her body was rocking back and forth like a Muslim reciting the Koran – concurrently tightened and flexible in its posture. Her lips were chanting two words in a regular beat that coincided with her rocking body and her pointy finger rhythmically hitting the spacebar. The room was filled with an intently but low-voiced 'singing of the game' as she murmured "and…**now**…and…**now**…and**now**…and**now**" spelling out the pulse of the game in order to stay in the rhythm and not get caught in any obstacles as she was running as fast as she could to stay ahead of the stampeding bull. The activity was loaded with a dense tactile enjoyment – 'the meaning of gaming' **was** this rocking the body, chanting, moving with the rhythm, and dancing with the game as her body learned and found delight in the game's kinetic melody.*

Body movin': Grasping significance through corporeality

Besides descriptions like these, another way of breaking through and making researchers let down their 'biased' guards is through combining corporeality, locomotion and music. In this way, I was able to explicate and concretize the gaming experience as a corporeal experience of 'thinking *in* movement' and not merely thinking or sensing *by means of* movement or *intentionally transforming* cognition or perception *into* movement. By combining music and corporeal locomotion I was able to show the aesthetics of the kinesthetic and illuminate how the player isn't cognitively or perceptually one intentional step ahead of his moving body. Rather, his tactile-kinesthetic attunement is the reference point for organizing his experience: What he sees is seen kinesthetically, what he knows is knowledge through movement, and how he acts is in the form of corporeal actions.

Thus, the project's initial breakdown is transformed to a breakout from the traditional pervading stances through adding the players' corporeality and corporeal movements to the equation. And the breakout is subsequently transformed to a breakthrough within game research by illuminating how the player epistemologically constitutes the gaming experience through movements as he gets to know the gameworld's objects from relating them to his performed corporeal actions and movements, and additionally from moving himself in relation to them. For a *World of Warcraft* player, the material instruments he plays, the corporeal locomotory virtuosity he develops, the rhythmic 'feel' for the score of the game and the orchestrated pulse of the raid-group, sediments over time within his gaming body as tacit, kinetic melodies.

The confirmation of claims: Gamers

My project's continuing proving ground has always been twofold as the players' confirmation of my claims and analyses and the game researchers' acknowledgement of the project's novelty and relevance have been of equal importance. If my perspective, descriptions and analyses resonates within the players' gaming bodies and makes them 'feel' the gaming experience anew and say things like "Yeah, that's just like in *World of Warcraft* – you know a keyboard-turner when you see one" or "These gaming hands are definitely FPS-hands, you can tell by the way he is caressing the WSAD-keys" or "When I'm playing *Rock Band* for several hours, it just starts to flow through my fingers instead of going through my brain". So I'm always testing my claims through the corporeal validation and recognition of gaming bodies.

The request for results: Game Scholars

Simultaneously, I am also constantly adapting and evolving my project in relation to the kind of response I get from the research community. So far I have gained insight into the importance of being challenged by and subsequently challenge the dominant research positions: Only then was I able to find a blind spot of my own – and fight for its place in the scholarly spotlight

Furthermore, I have gained insight into the importance of breakdown (of ones own research stance) and breakout (from the stereotypical research stances) in order to breakthrough (and break new ground): Only by breaking down my own framing of the game experience (as a primarily linguistic

practice) and by breaking out of the stereotypical framings of the gaming experience within the different research traditions, was I able to make my project work more like a prism than a torch in my effort to try and describe how the corporeal practices are reflected in the digital practices, how the corporeal and the digital practices are reflected in the communicative practices and how they all are coloring the gaming experience with their own individual colors and in their own qualitative, meaningful and significant way.

Now being halfway through my project the next potential breakdown is approaching as the beginning request for results from game scholars emerges: Having approved my claim about corporeality and locomotion being a blind spot as well as having acknowledged its potential significance, they are now requesting proofs before finally letting it in and giving corporeality and corporeal locomotion a place in the spotlight.