

What Even Is Video Game Performance?

A conversation between Marleena Huuhka and Harold Hejazi

Abstract *The following text is a conversation between performance scholar Marleena Huuhka and live artist Harold Hejazi about video games as a medium of performance. Through examples from their work, they discuss video game performances and gameplay as performance today and the possible futures of these intermedial forms of performing arts.*

Conversation

In the summer of 2023, performance scholar Marleena Huuhka invited live artist Harold Hejazi to discuss the nature of video games as a form of performance. Harold Hejazi has been working at the intersection of games and performance since 2015 and performing with video games since 2020. Marleena Huuhka has been researching video games through performance theory since 2016. The two had just co-curated an exhibition about games as art at Poikilo Museums in Kouvola, Finland,¹ where they led exhibition tours through the lens of gameplay as performance.

Marleena Huuhka: Hi Harold! Do you think the practice of playing is art?

Harold Hejazi: Hey Marleena! Well, I do think so, especially when the player intends it to be. Perhaps you could say I have a Duchampian view on the matter, where playing is art if the player says it is. What do you think?

Marleena Huuhka: I think it also depends on the definition of art in general, but I do think playing can be defined as art. Who defines it is another question. I think that playing can also be framed as art – or, maybe more specifically, as performance – by the people looking at it. In some cases, the player might not even know their involvement in that process. I think the discussion on games as art² has long been focusing

1 <https://www.poikilo.fi/nayttelyt/nayttelyarkisto/pelipoikilo/>

2 See for example, Smuts 2005; Kirkpatrick 2011; Sharp 2015; Deardorff 2015; Bourgonjon et al. 2017; Bosman and Wiering 2022.

on the actual games as visual, narrative, or cinematic art, and play as practice has been a bit absent.

Harold Hejazi: Well, performance and games have both always been on the periphery of the art world, so the combination of games and performance is quite vulnerable to misrepresentation and reductionist critique. Also, performances are typically expected to be reserved for the stage or film, and games are often expected to be experienced behind a screen or shared around a table, so perhaps it's difficult to imagine a creative playing field where these worlds collide and combine.

Marleena Huuhka: I think there are also some underlying prejudices about both fields generally. Performance, especially performance art, might have been considered as elitist, while games and gameplay have had a reputation of being a sort of childish or, at best, juvenile pastime. I feel that, especially in the field of theatre and other performing arts, games have often only been seen as something to use in performance, although exceptions to this are popping up increasingly.³

I have also encountered a lot of people in the performing arts field that deny knowing anything about games or refuse to accept their cultural importance. While I don't necessarily think of games as the ultimate medium, I find it hard to understand such dismissive thinking.

Harold Hejazi: Do you mean that games have usually been 'something to use in performance' as in props or themes rather than the gameplay being the performance itself? Certainly, game performance is a medium that is still slowly gaining awareness of itself. And just so we're on the same page, by 'game performance' I am referring quite loosely to a combination of a game and a performance.

Marleena Huuhka: Exactly. There is a significant difference between games as aesthetic tropes and gameplay as performative action. I think, as the field is pretty new, these things get easily scrambled. For readers interested in these categorical differences, I have written an article about the matter. In the article I suggest five approaches to understanding video games as/with performance: video games as an aesthetic resource, video games as a structural category, performances staged inside video games, performances made with video games, and gameplay as performance (Huuhka 2020).

Harold Hejazi: I'm curious what you see in the future of video games/gameplay as performance. Do you have any predictions for the form?

3 Since the 2000s, performance companies have increasingly been using game elements, as, for example, described in Benford and Giannachi 2011.

Marleena Huuhka: I think in the future there will be more emphasis on virtual reality, and theatres will surely expand their repertoire to the virtual. When it comes to gameplay as performance, I don't know if it will ever be popular,⁴ as it seems to be a bit hard to swallow in both fields. But I do believe games, and especially game technologies and aesthetics, will be increasingly appropriated in theatre practices in the future.

Harold Hejazi: I fully agree that game technologies and aesthetics will only increase in prevalence in theatre and performance. By virtue of existing on the digital plane, video game performances allow for new horizons of possibility. However, I disagree that gameplay as performance is unlikely to become popular. Aren't gaming videos already a massive form of entertainment? It's safe to assume that there are more people watching video game performers online than there are people attending theatre performances.

Marleena Huuhka: In my experience, there has been reluctance to accept video games, or rather the gameplay experience, into the traditional canon of what is considered art. What I mean by 'gameplay as performance' is actual acts of gameplay being framed as performance, and I don't really see those sorts of deliberate acts as being so popular. Maybe it is a phenomenon that exists mostly in my conceptual horizon and not in the actual practices of players or performers.

I agree gaming videos are a significant form of entertainment already, and I do believe their impact will be visible in other types of entertainment and performance in the future.

Harold Hejazi: I predict that the passive theatre spectator will evolve into that of an active multiplayer audience member. Perhaps people won't pile into theatres to just watch a performer play a game, but I do think audiences will go to theatres to participate as active players of games led by main performers⁵. Multiplayer game performance will allow audiences greater levels of immersion in the narrative or conceptual framework of a game, allowing them to experience multiple structures and viewpoints.

In some formulations, audiences might sit at a proscenium stage all with their own game controllers in their hand,⁶ or they might be in a black box moving freely in an immersive VR piece.⁷ These performance formats are already happening and are

4 Beyond the (quite popular) forms of immersive theatre, where the gameplay is often quite rudimentary.

5 Such as in the theatre of *machina eX*. See the corresponding chapter in this volume.

6 *Best Before* (2010) by Rimini Protokoll is an early example.

7 For VR theatre, check, for example, the work of Crew or RGB Project.

bound to become more widespread as traditional theatres grapple with attracting younger audiences.

Marleena Huuhka: I agree that games, and especially game technologies, will be used more in performing arts in the future. And performances already do happen inside games, for sure. Performances done in VR, AR, or inside video games can be accessible for huge audiences but also demand a lot of money for the production.

A possible pitfall for traditional theatres experimenting in this field is that investing in VR technologies and game-like environments without thinking of the gamer audiences might only lead to flops.

Harold Hejazi: Theatres are surely vulnerable to the allure of game technologies in their pursuit of relevance, even though technology doesn't always contribute meaningfully to a performance's conceptual framework.

Both theatre and game value the experience of immersion in their own ways, so there is great potential for these two disciplines to inform and expand each other. For theatre makers and game developers, there's a long road ahead in understanding each other's audiences and bridging communities.

So how did your relationship with video games as performance first begin?

Marleena Huuhka: At the beginning of my PhD journey, I was going to do research on animal representations in certain video games. However, I got bored with the concept of representation and started to think about what is the thing that makes games special, and that is obviously gameplay itself. There was already some research on LARPs (live action role-playing games) as performative acts,⁸ so it made sense to start applying performance and theatre research theories to video games as well.

You come from the field of live art,⁹ right? How did you decide to start using games as a medium? Or do you consider them to be your medium or content?

Harold Hejazi: My master's adventure focused on game design and its affordances for a live art practice. The research method consisted of rapid prototyping live art games, which combined recognisable elements of both 'game' and 'live art' and performing them as practice-based research. This research culminated in the development of a video game titled *Adventures of Harriharri* (2021). This game was created

8 On this subject, see, for example, Hoover et al. (2018) and Stenros et al. (2010).

9 The term live art refers to performances or events undertaken or staged by an artist or a group of artists as a work of art, which is usually innovative and exploratory in nature (Tate n.d.)

purely for the purpose of live performance, using the Let's Play format as a theatrical medium.

Figure 1: Adventures of Harriharri – Episode I (2020). Photocourtesy of Video Art Festival Turku (VAFT). Photo: Milla Kangasjärvi.



Marleena Huuhka: Was it difficult to combine video games and live performance? I mean, in the sense of reception, was it understood? Do you think your performances, or rather the game aspect of them, would work separately? Are your games playable by others, or do they only work when performed by you?

Harold Hejazi: It wasn't too difficult to combine video games and performance because I actually stumbled upon it by accident. In 2020, I had to make a video game during a course, and while presenting it to my peers, I suddenly started performing it.

The video games developed for *Adventures of Harriharri* are only meant to be played by me and were created solely for the purpose of performance! There is no tutorialisation or consideration of another user's experience, so if someone started playing it, they'd have no idea where to go or what to do. Sure, if they'd seen the performance and then tried playing through the game themselves, they'd probably manage to find the triggers and move through the narrative sequence to complete

the game; however, I'd consider this analogous to beating the game with a cheat code.

In my experience, people understand this video game performance when they experience it live, but when I try to describe it in writing or show video documentation, they often don't quite understand what it is or dismiss it as just another live-streamed gaming video.

Marleena Huuhka: So, you mean your first video game performance was improvisation? I think that is interesting, as it demonstrates the deeper differences between games and performances. Games, especially video games, need some planning and intentionality to exist at all, but performance has a possibility to emerge whenever and use any other medium for this emergence.

Harold Hejazi: Yes, my first video game performance was entirely improvised! I was ashamed of the game I made for my class project, so the performance spontaneously emerged out of a desperate attempt to redeem myself.

Marleena Huuhka: Why do you think people cannot imagine your performances as performances? I have a hunch that it might have something to do with the following: people still have very limited imagination when it comes to performances, and when you add the medium of video game there, it kind of shifts the focus from you as a performer to the game. And like in any other multimedia performance, the technological achievement of it steals the spotlight from the performer. We shift our focus to technological performance. So basically, it is tough for the human performer to stand next to the technological performer, as the latter still has some sort of novelty value. I think the same can be observed in current discussions on AI art and AI development in general.

And that might lead to – I don't know if it has happened yet or not – a situation where your art is the game rather than the performance. The game thus gains more agency than intended.

Harold Hejazi: I agree that an artist's technical prowess is often the focus of multimedia performance, but in the case of *Adventures of Harriharri*, the technical achievement is quite minimal. The audience encounters a rather primitive video game with crude graphics and programming. I like to think that this is what gives the work its charm, because it shifts the viewer's attention to what really matters: the story and the performance.

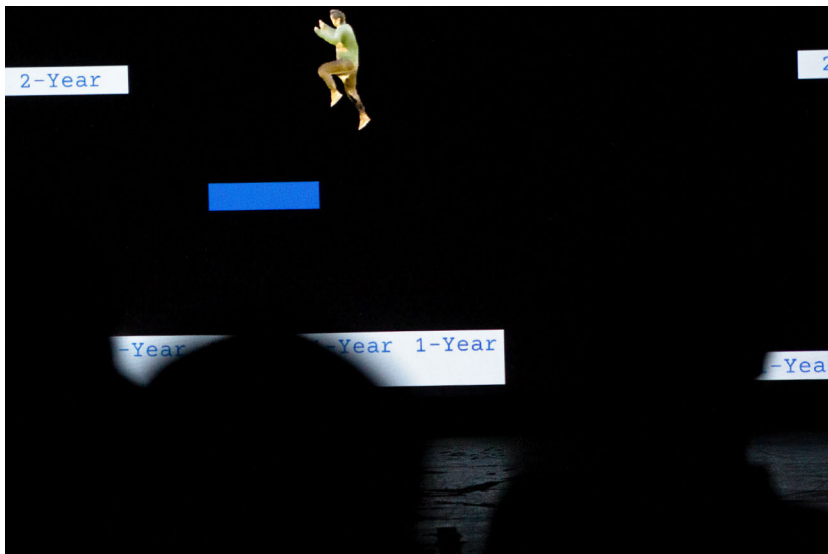
Without the experience of the live performance, people seem to have a hard time comprehending my video game performances. I think this is because there aren't any popular examples in the art world or any pre-established conventions for the medium for people to frame their understanding in. Without a precedent to pro-

vide context, it's easy to get lost, so I don't blame people who don't get it. Drawing the link between games and performance was the work of my multi-year research project, and I don't expect audiences to have a professional education in contemporary arts which might accustom them to transdisciplinary artwork and genre-based conceptual frameworks. It took me years to even begin to imagine video game performance myself!

In this genre, artists often take on multiple roles, including game developer, director, and performer. Essentially, they make games and perform them for live audiences.

In terms of gameplay being recognised as performance/art, I think it's much easier for audiences to draw the link between gameplay and performance when the artist designed and crafted the game to be inhabited by the live performance. In this way, the work is clearly elevated from entertainment to art. Do you know what I mean?

Figure 2: Adventures of Harriharri – Episode III (2022). Photo: Karoliina Korvuo.



Marleena Huuhka: I see what you mean, and I do agree that artists making their own games definitely makes it easier for the audience to understand, as art and especially as performance. It then has the element of 'craft' in it – an artist showing their craftsmanship in various arts. And that is an elevation from entertainment, surely.

Making performances in commercially successful games has another purpose. At least that is what I have been aiming to do in my work – instead of producing art, producing resistance against the capitalist logics of video games, which may or may not be understood as art but definitely can be understood as performance.

Harold Hejazi: Your approach to working with mass-produced, commercially available video games reminds me again of Duchamp and his notion of the readymade. Are video games like readymades to you? Could you share an example of your performative resistance in a pre-made, commercially successful game?

Marleena Huuhka: I see video games as potential places and spaces of doing, being, and seeing differently. My work is readymade in the sense that I try to make hidden structures and attitudes visible by changing the perspective, not by breaking or creating new art from scratch.

A good example would be my experiments in Minecraft (Mojang Studios, 2011). As the main objective of the game is to explore and build, I spend a lot of time inside the game doing absolutely nothing. It is quite hard, as the game is constantly inviting you to mine, find, and construct. Choosing not to obey the intended narrative reveals the colonialist, capitalist pull of adventure as well as your personal investment in this structure.

Harold Hejazi: Sounds like you're quite the innovative Minecrafter. Keep up the good research and resistance! It's been so fun talking with you about this, Marleena. Thank you for sharing your insight about what video game performance even is and what it can be in the future.

Marleena Huuhka: Thanks, Harold. I look forward to seeing what you play and perform next!

References

- Benford, Steve, Giannachi, Gabriella. 2011. *Performing Mixed Reality*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press.
- Bosman, Frank G., and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen. 2022. *Video Games as Art: A Communication-Oriented Perspective on the Relationship between Gaming and the Art*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731019>
- Bourgonjon, Jeroen, Geert Vandermeersche, Kris Rutten, and Quinten Niels. 2017. 'Perspectives on Video Games as Art.' *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19 (4).

- Deardorff, Nathan. 2015. 'An Argument That Video Games Are, Indeed, High Art.' *Forbes*, 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/berlinschoolofcreativeleadership/2015/10/13/an-argument-that-video-games-are-indeed-high-art/>
- Hejazi, Harold. 2020. *Adventures of Harriharri – Episode I*. Ateneum Art Museum, UrbanApa X Ateneum, Helsinki.
- . 2021. *Adventures of Harriharri – Episode II*. Performance of 25 September 2021, Cultural House Martinus, Vantaa Art Museum Artsi, Reciprocities Exhibition, Vantaa.
- . 2022. 'Adventures in Live Art Game Research: Towards a Theory of Definition'. MA thesis, Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy.
- Huuhka, Marleena. 2019. 'Journeys in Intensity: Human and Nonhuman Co-Agency, Neuropower, and Counterplay in Minecraft'. In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, 218–235. New York: Routledge.
- . 2020. 'Playing is Performing: Video Games as Performance'. In *Einspielungen: Prozesse und Situationen digitalen Spielens*, edited by Markus Spöhrer and Harald Waldrich, 59–78. Neue Perspektiven der Medienästhetik. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.
- Kirkpatrick, Graeme. 2011. *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Sharp, John. 2015. *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smuts, Aaron. 2005. 'Are Video Games Art?' *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0003.006>.
- Stenos, Jaakko, Markus Montola, Samir Belarbi, and Kim Aagaard. 2010. *Nordic Larp*. Stockholm: Fëa Livia.
- Tate. N.d. 'Live art'. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/l/live-art>.

Biographies

Harold Hejazi (MA) is a live artist, educator, and game designer from British Columbia, Canada. As a pedagogue, his practice focuses on creating games and participatory performances in collaboration with the educational departments of museums and art galleries. This work motivated him to focus his master's research at Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy on game design and its affordances for a live art practice. In recent years, he has been using the medium of video games for live cinematic storytelling that examines issues of race, marginalisation, and contemporary multiculturalism in Finland. His game performances have been shown at

various theatres and exhibitions within the Nordic countries. <http://haroldhejazi.com>

Marleena Huuhka (MA) is a doctoral researcher and university instructor at Tampere University, Finland. Her PhD thesis 'Weird encounters in virtual worlds: towards a theory of performative, anarchic counterplay as resistance' (2024) examines video games as places of performative resistance and searches for new counterplay practices. She is interested in phenomena happening in the intersections of virtual, physical, and performative spaces. Her recent publications include 'Performing Gameplay – A Study of Video Game Performance Workshops' (2021) in *Body, Space & Technology* (Vol. 20)