

On Buddhist Frogs and Flower Arrangements: Out-of-Game's Spatial Production in Friendship Games

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Introduction

In this paper, I look at Lefebvre's theory on spatial production, with a specific focus on spatial practice and representational spaces. I propose that actionability; in-game objects' propensity to be interacted with, defines how Lefebvre's spatial classification is reproduced within game spaces. By looking at how Lefebvre's spatial classification is produced, I propose that we can understand how games create values. I will do this by looking at Friendship Games.

Friendship Games

Friendship Games, such as *Neko Atsume*, *Tabikaeru* and the *Animal Crossing* franchise games often have a core gameplay loop that encourages a neo-capitalist reading of consumption and collection (Bogost, 2008; Scully-Blaker, 2018a; Harrington, 2018). However, the pleasure that players derive from them is often not (solely) oriented around this loop, but rather around forming relationships with in-game non-playable characters.

Tabikaeru does this incredibly well – in this game, players visit a journeying frog's house and leave him gifts and resources for its next journey. There is no obligation as to how often you have to do this, or on what you give the frog (it must have one travel item, minimum, to travel). However, by giving the frog generous gifts often, you get to receive more postcards of the frog's travel, which are very sweet and heart-warming.

Despite its core game-play loop being neocapitalistic (collect clovers, buy travel items for your frog, send him on journeys, buy better items, send him on better journeys, and so on), the game earned the nickname of 佛系养蛙 (Buddhism Frog) on Chinese social media due to its perceived meditative and anti-consumptionist qualities. Social media posting of the game does not revolve around the bought collection aspect of the game (the travel gear you buy), but rather around the semi-random collection aspect of the game (the postcards the frog sends you).

This prompted me to pose the question as to how this happens. It is clear what these games ask you to do, but the meaning that players acquire does not align with the method of gameplay. This contradiction between the gameplay loop and the player take-away has been hypothesised before in previous papers. Bogost (2013) argues that *Animal Crossing* games have a constant clash between consumption and capitalism. Bogost argues that the gameplay loop constantly entices you to earn money, to build larger houses, in order to be able to fit more customisable furniture,

which requires more money, leading to a persistent loop. However, the anthropomorphic animals in Animal Crossing games enjoy long walks outside, naps, watching the player perform the money-making game-play loops and being part of a very naturalist ascetic community. Bogost argues that this leads to simulation fever, “an internal crisis wrought between the game’s rules and the player’s subjective response to them.”

Meanwhile, Scully-Blaker (2018b) argues that Animal Crossing games perform a Radical Slowness; an act of playing at an intentionally slower pace in order to oppose capitalism’s over-productive nature. While the game’s core gameplay loop encourages players to consistently earn money and build bigger houses, players often break out of this core gameplay loop in order to perform acts outside of Bogost’s proceduralist rhetoric. He gives an example of sitting down on a park bench in Animal Crossing, an act which does exactly nothing towards the gameplay loop. Drawing from Mathis’s theories on Radical Softness, Scully-Blaker calls these acts a form of critical play that does not necessarily emerge from critical game design.

In this paper I would argue that there are more fruitful ways to look at these contrastive elements than in contradiction. In order to do so, I posit that we can make strong use of Lefebvre’s concepts of spatial production, specifically spatial practice and representational spaces.

Lefebvre’s Production of Space

Lefebvre creates three concepts to describe space: spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (1991, 38-39), of which I will focus on the former and the latter specifically. In a previous work, I explained how “Spatial practice within society is how society’s space is both presupposed but also perpetuated. It is space as perceived. Society’s space is constantly under production by this spatial practice, which leads to it being mastered by the practice itself. Lefebvre continues by explaining how societal space within neo-capitalism, exemplified by our urban reality which features separated nodes connected through routes and networks, is constantly being performed by our daily routines and reality. As neo-capitalism affects the way we act, encouraging us to separate our work and leisure so that each of these can be measure empirically, so are our spaces formed to accompany this activity segregation.

“Representational spaces are the way spaces are experienced by its inhabitants, using images and symbols. It is space as lived. Lefebvre describes representational spaces not as dominant, but as “dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate,” (1991, 39) to which I would add that this change and appropriation exists not on a societal level, but on an interpersonal one. He explains that this space rests above the physical space, and it uses the physical objects as symbolic ones too.”(Harrington, 2018)

To place these two concepts within actual life spatial production, spatial practice would be why offices spaces are shaped as cubicles; they are meant to induce a workspace where employee’s work is segregated and compartmentalised, but still not individuated and personally owned. The space reflects the production happening, as the space was designed to promote and enforce that production. Representational spaces is when employees put pictures of their spouses and children in their office space, leading the office space to also signify personal strife and struggle for their

family. While the spatial practice is one of abstracted production, the representational space is, or can be, one of overcoming personal strife.

I would argue that Friendship Games exist can be explained within similar conceptions. Game rules enforce games' spatial practice. Continuing on Lefebvre's notions above, objects that encourage us to interact with them in specific limited ways are designed as such to perpetuate the spatial practice that exists within the space. This claim is not new, with Crawford (2015) making similar claims very comprehensively. Crawford argues that perceiving game spaces as representational space, such as previously argued by Aarseth (2007) and Gunzel (2007) is erroneous as it is trying to apply Lefebvre's tripartite spatial distinction as an inclusive taxonomy, rather than a schema to describe all space as a whole. He continued to state that Lefebvre had made it abundantly clear, as with other Marx' inspired authors, that leisure can still be a means to propagate the dominant culture and can be as alienating as other activities. It is here that Crawford draws on Gottdiener's theory on theming, arguing that sports game spaces are non-spaces themed around an idea of formulaic understandable control of sporting activities in a society that offers none, sport-wise or otherwise.

My reading of Lefebvre's work is very empathetic with Crawford's. Games Studies can be overly taxonomical, to what in this case was intended as a macro-analytical tool in a Marxist tradition. Additionally, Game Studies has the tendency towards being focused on the textual, where player actions are discussed over the spatial practice designed and perpetuated by these games' designs, which exist within a larger much broader societal context.

This problems is perhaps none clearer than in Friendship Games; using Crawford's work, these would be non-spaces themed around controlling the spatio-economic production around us, in a society that perpetually gives us none of this control. However, I would pull away from Crawford, in arguing that this micro space (or non-space) gives us avenue to analyse whether Lefebvre's lived space can also be lived in such a hyper-designed produced-space. If there is such a thing as lived space in games which are procedurally "Capitalism, but friendly", then there is still merit to discuss representational spaces within game spaces at large.

Production of Space in Friendship Games

In *Productions of Space*, Lefebvre argues that representational space rears itself on two levels: through the "writers and philosophers, who aspire to do no more than describe," on which I have written otherwise (ibid.); as well as on the interpersonal level as lived and perpetuated by its inhabitants who imagine these spaces in different ways. It is clear that playing the game's core game-play loop is not a sufficient way to re-interpret these spaces. Earlier on, I discussed how Bogost's reading of *Animal Crossing's* proceduralism shows how non-amenable its core gameplay loop is to questioning digital games' neoliberal tendencies. Scully-Blaker also supported that playing *Animal Crossing* would be perpetuating the spatial practice that Crawford says games are very guilty of.

However, as Sicart (2011) argues, players can generate meaning outside of rule-interaction and through following the perceived core gameplay loop designed into the game. The question then

becomes whether this generated meaning can beyond the personal, and become the interpersonal lived discourse that Lefebvre states the main spatial production dominates.

I would like to posit that the out-of-games presents the opportunity to both perpetuate the spatial production that dominates games' non-spaces while also being the most amenable to produce these spaces' representational meaning.

The Out-of-Games

As Crawford pointed out, computers “turn life into calculations, where choices in games are goal orientated and rationalized, and gamers into “information economy worker””. If the game is the realm of the perceived, then it might be worth analysing the Out-of-Game for content of the lived. In this paper, when I write of the out-of-game, I am making a distinction between the game and the digital game; as posited by previous writers such as Aarseth (2007). The game is that which contains the calculable, the lusory, that which exists into what I've been previously referring to as the core gameplay loop. The digital game is the textual artefact that contains this core-gameplay loop.

Without delving deeply into the merit of this distinction, I am utilising this distinction as it creates a bit more rigour to Crawford's argumentation that play exists within a larger societal context that perpetuates the dominant culture. If games are designed to perpetuate the dominant culture, then at the very least, existing in the digital games' non-space while not participating in the game itself leaves the dominant culture at a stand-still, a status quo that it enjoys, but perhaps does not thrive on. Using Crawford's example specifically, the quantification of football skills, such as passing or shooting, only serve as an extension of player's wish for control in an alienated world, if the player employs the digital game space for the game. If the player switches on *FIFA18* for the soundtrack, the digital space still exists, alongside the tools for giving alienated players control, however, the tools are not employed as such in this digital game space.

Even if the tools are not employed, they are still there. Games still exist within a social context that produces spaces that aid the dominant. However, I would argue that the most-amenable position for the dominated to inhabit, for interpersonal relationships to exist and create lived space, it is in this non-space's liminalities, when the players are not trying to control the space, but rather living alongside it.

Looking at Friendship Games gives us an interesting avenue to explore why. Firstly, we can look at the Out-of-Game, which is propped by the game, but exists independent of both the game and the digital game non-space. *Tabikaeru* is a game, that up until this day, has not been translated into English. However, it has racked up over a million installs on the Google Play store, with most reviews written in English. This means that the game control for the alienated in this digital game-space is diminished, resulting to the main value generated from the digital actual space happening outside of the game. It happens on social media, such as WeChat in China, as players share photos of where their frog has been. Players do not always completely understand why the frog has gone to certain places, as the game procedure is lost in translation, but the sonder generated from sharing what is essentially a magical-realist photo-album translates

interpersonally which players experience together. As Sicart (2008) argues, even solo games are never played alone, *Tabikaeru* is hardly meant to even be played as a game rather than socially recreated post-game.

Secondly, we can look at the Out-of-Game, which is propped up by the game, but exists independently of the game, yet inside the digital game non-space. Acting out a game procedure to non-goal oriented degrees also gives an avenue to explore lived spaces. In *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, I set up a beautiful garden of various roses which achieved absolutely nothing. It did not play towards the game's mechanisms of value aspiration, as the flowers cost nothing, they sold for nothing, and were largely non-interactable (you could place them, and water them, which did exactly nothing since my town had a green thumb perk). Scully-Blaker (2018) argued that his favourite moment in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* was when he sat on a particular bench and just waited, fully knowing that this led to nothing in the game. What it did do is create an interpersonal bond with others that similarly ascribed meaning to that bench, or that garden, of a non-space aesthetics in a world that offers little.

Finally, we can look at the Out-of-Game, which is propped up by the game, exists in dependence with the game, yet exists outside of it and still within the digital game space. In a previous paper, I showed how the infra-ordinary space in *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*, is also heavily appropriated by the dominant culture, as the propriety company inserts itself in the inside jokes, restricts the games' indigenous language, and creates simulacra of friendly spaces. However, the existence of an indigenous language, for example, could still give space for meaning to be generated interpersonally – despite the language not being encoded in the game, it still exists to be imagined by players, and is already being lived by the non-playable characters (Harrington, 2018).

Conclusion

It would be fallacious to argue that the above situations do not perpetuate spatial practice; seeking social, aesthetic, or linguistic production in digital game spaces shows full well our frustration at the alienation towards the production that we suffer in actual space. However, it is important to note that the value we generate from the out-of-game production is often interpersonally lived, and not game enforced. These games, *Animal Crossing* especially, have had an overabundance of writing about their neoliberal production – the people subsisting in these digital game spaces know full well that they are part of a dominated culture. However, players still feel that they had the opportunity to be out of, if not even to subvert, the dominant culture.

Crawford rightfully argued that previous Lefebvrian applications saw the tripartite distinction as taxonomical rather than schematic, and seeing digital games as representation spaces is missing the Marxist theoretical background that underpins digital games. While he shows very clearly how sports games are spaces as perceived, in this paper, I hope to have shown how, if the Lefebvrian schema can be applied within digital game spaces, it most likely exists within the out-of-game, where meaning can be generated alongside the dominant culture, with the hope that it is not drowned out by it.

Games

ANIMAL CROSSING: POCKET CAMP. Nintendo, Mobile Phones, 2017.
ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF. Nintendo, Handheld Consoles, 2013.
FIFA 18. EA Sports, Various, 2018.
NEKO ATSUME. Hit-Point Co. Ltd, Mobile Phones, 2014.
TABIKAERU. Hit-Point Co. Ltd, Mobile Phones, 2017.

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