

JYX



This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Kalmanlehto, Johan

Title: Aesthetics of Agency and the Rhythm of Gameplay

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

Copyright: © 2023 the Authors

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Kalmanlehto, J. (2023). Aesthetics of Agency and the Rhythm of Gameplay. *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media*, OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231185630>

Aesthetics of Agency and the Rhythm of Gameplay

Johan Kalmanlehto 

Games and Culture

1–17

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/15554120231185630

journals.sagepub.com/home/gac



Abstract

In this study I investigate aesthetics of agency in games in terms of rhythm. Following C. Thi Nguyen's theory of agency as the aesthetic medium of games, I suggest that the aesthetic experience of agency can be interpreted in terms of rhythm. First, I provide an overview of Nguyen's theory of games as the art of agency. By focusing on Nguyen's characterization of the aesthetic experience of agency, I highlight a need for a more detailed description of agential aesthetics. Second, I introduce a philosophical interpretation of rhythm as a distinction between form and flow. Finally, by using *Elden Ring* as an example I argue that an understanding rhythm as form in continuous motion captures the transient and mutable character of agency as the object of the player's aesthetic experience. Rhythm provides insight into the temporal nature of Nguyen's process aesthetics and explains how agency can have nonconceptual meaning.

Keywords

agency, rhythm, gameplay, aesthetics

Introduction

Once again, my character stepped through the fog gate into the boss arena where Malenia, blade of Miquella awaited, and once again, the grueling encounter was ended by my inability to react to her movements correctly. I had attempted to

Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Johan Kalmanlehto, Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, PL 35, 40014, Finland.

Email: johan.d.kalmanlehto@jyu.fi

defeat the notorious optional boss in the action role playing game *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022) without aid from other players or characters countless times. Malenia moves fast and has devastating attack patterns that are difficult to dodge and deal huge amount of damage. At the same time, she heals herself every time she hits the player or their shield. Dodging her attacks is almost only viable strategy but this requires precise timing and reaction to her attack animations. Like in many previous games by FromSoftware, boss fights in *Elden Ring* are like rhythm games, where the player must react to visual cues with correct inputs. While this description might fit many digital games, *Elden Ring* feels more like a dance, as the player must match their character's movement and position to the enemy's actions. Evading the attacks is not only a question of timing but also position and direction—at the same time the player must already anticipate what comes next and search for a moment to attack that fits the attack animations of their own weapon. Despite being frustrating and compulsive, the learning process that leads to almost automated reactions was enjoyable, which was probably the reason that kept me trying. Through learning the rhythm of her attacks and conditioning my responses to match it, I finally managed to defeat Malenia. I then immediately went back to the boss arena to help other players in the fight, now dodging Malenia's difficult attacks more confidently and appreciating the struggle in a new light. According to C. Thi Nguyen (2019, 2020a, 2020b), in this process I experienced aesthetically my own enactment of the agential posture framed by *Elden Ring*. I argue that this experience was aesthetic because it was a rhythmic one; not only did the gameplay have a rhythm, but also the aesthetic experience of my own skill and agency was intrinsically rhythmic.

In this study I propose that an interpretation of rhythm as a changing flow is relevant to the aesthetics of agency in gameplay. My aim is to expand C. Thi Nguyen's (2019, 2020a, 2020b) work on agency as the aesthetic medium of games. I argue that by approaching Nguyen's theory through characterizations of rhythm in continental philosophy, the nature of aesthetic experience related to one's own agency can be understood better. I use the combat mechanic of *Elden Ring* as a case study to elaborate how agency is rhythmic in gameplay.

As temporal patterning and variation, rhythm occurs always when passage of time is involved. Hence, there are multiple kinds of rhythms involved in the activity of playing games. On a macroscale, playing games as part of human life has a rhythm, for example in terms of time used for playing and types of game played during different life situations. Such periodic changes produce a rhythm of their own. On a smaller scale, players can have weekly and monthly rhythms of playing that are entangled with other rhythms of everyday life. In this article, I will focus on even smaller scale microlevel rhythms of gameplay as part of the aesthetics of agency. Instead of measurable intervals, I view rhythm as an important part of the phenomenal experience of agency as the aesthetic medium of games.

Nguyen views games as a subset of a wider category that he calls "process arts" and "arts of action." Process arts consist of artifacts, tangible or conceptual, which, when

interacted with, give rise to an experience of action that has aesthetic qualities. In object arts, the artifact itself has aesthetic qualities but in process arts, aesthetic qualities are in the enactor's own experience of taking action. More generally, object aesthetics consists of objects that are perceived as aesthetic, whereas process aesthetics consists of actions that feel aesthetic for the enactor.

Following Nguyen, I begin from the proposition that playing games has a specific aesthetic quality that pertains to the act of playing and the experience of agency related to it. My purpose is to distinguish the aesthetics of agency from object-based aesthetics of games, such as representation and narrative. Nguyen's focus in *Games: Agency as Art* (2020b) is to defend the art status of games by arguing that games have an aesthetic medium of their own, namely agency. My focus differs from Nguyen in that I discuss only how the experience of agency can be aesthetic and do not attempt to defined games as art.

Instead of cataloging different aesthetic aspects of agency, I find it more fruitful to thematize process aesthetics through a wider perspective to the phenomenal experience of taking action. To provide insight into the aesthetic experience that is specific to agency, I introduce an interpretation of rhythm that is based on Émile Benveniste (1971) and Henri Meschonnic (1982). Instead of regularity and stable form, they interpret rhythm as a continuous change in temporal variation, that has form only in the instant. I propose that this notion of rhythm can elaborate how the experience of agency can have meaning and how this differs from the meaning conveyed by imagery and verbal discourse in games. This provides an extension of Nguyen's analytic view toward continental philosophy and aesthetics.

While a game artifact is constituted by unchanging rules and goals, as changing them would render it a different game, rhythm can introduce variation into gameplay. On a very basic level, the rhythms of player actions vary by different playstyles. In competitive forms of play the pursuit of a most optimal strategy can diminish such variations. However, this article will focus on gameplay as a leisurely activity, an aesthetic practice that is engaged for its own sake and gives more room for varying rhythms. Interpreting the aesthetics of agency through rhythm also provides a way to understand its temporal nature, which differentiates the experience of one's own agency from the experience of aesthetic objects.

The methods used in the article consist of close reading and philosophical analysis. The research materials consist of philosophical texts by Nguyen, Benveniste, and Meschonnic. I argue that the aesthetics of agency is primarily related to nonconceptual meaning. Agency arouses emotions and affects, but it is not necessarily conceptualized through verbal discourse. By introducing an interpretation of rhythm as an organizing principle of sense-making that transcends verbal meaning, I argue that aesthetics of agency is rhythmic. As rhythm has implications for subjectivity and societal character of human existence, this interpretation opens agency for a wider societal and existential perspective, although these points cannot be addressed further within the limits of the current article.

Object and Process Aesthetics

Before investigating rhythm directly, I provide an outline of Nguyen's aesthetics of agency and explicate how rhythm can be relevant to it. The differentiation between object and process aesthetics provides insight into the temporal nature of gameplay, which is crucial for characterizing agency in terms of rhythm. Nguyen's theory is based on Bernard Suits' theory of playing games as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, 1978, p. 41). In this view, a game is constituted by an arbitrary goal and obstacles. With gameplay, I refer to player's interaction with a game artifact that is compatible with the Suitsian conception of games. More precisely, I view it as goal-oriented practical action within a predefined environment and a framework of restrictions and abilities. While digitality may have implications for the experience of gameplay in terms of how computers and algorithms affect players, this view does not make strong distinction between digital and nondigital games. Games that do not have a structure of goals and obstacles might not fit into this definition, but they can nevertheless be regarded as process arts.

Nguyen argues that the aesthetic medium of games is agency: through games, players can experiment with different types of agential postures and have aesthetic experiences of their own enactment of these agencies. Games belong under the category of process arts, in which the focus of aesthetic attention is the subjective experience of acting.¹ It is important to notice that Nguyen's conception of agency is not related to a freedom of choice or exercising control. In game studies, agency is often discussed in such terms (Stang, 2019), but Nguyen's notion of agency merely means an agential posture: a predefined way of accomplishing a practical task.

Process arts, including games, are artifacts made with an intention of framing predefined conditions for such experiences. For example, typical object arts include paintings, novels, and dance performances. Process arts, according to Nguyen's (2020a) examples, include games, social dancing, and cooking. Many object arts have process aesthetic qualities and vice versa, but Nguyen points out that the Western philosophical tradition has favored object aesthetics, leaving process arts in the margin. Many object arts also require activity on the part of the recipient—for example, reading literature requires the use of one's imaginative faculty. However, Nguyen (2020a) points out that literature usually does not make this imaginative activity as such the focus of aesthetic attention, but the fiction that is constructed with it.

Contemplating a game as an object is never comparable to the experience of agency that results from playing it. Using rock climbing as an example, Nguyen (2020b, p. 119) says that when the climber is fully focused on overcoming the challenge, object aesthetic qualities of the rock are filtered out the experience. The climber's attention is focused on what matters to the practical task of climbing and not how pleasing the color of the rock is. This first-order filtered form of attention can be appreciated aesthetically through a second-order reflection of what doing the practical task

feels like. This does not rule out the possibility of paying a second-order attention also to the color of the rock, for example, but Nguyen seems to suggest that aesthetic features of the object are not relevant for experiencing the agency aesthetically.

However, few games aim for such an experience of extreme focus. It pertains mostly to highly competitive gameplay situations, such as professional sports, while digital gameplay—excluding esports—is largely a leisurely activity that can be engaged with a variety of aesthetic attitudes. A difficult boss fight might require the player to focus only on such features of the game which are related to defeating the boss, but I think it is impossible to filter out other elements on the screen that have only fictional and narrative role. Especially through their elaborate game-worlds and graphical representations, digital games blur the boundary between process and object aesthetics, which is perhaps one reason for Nguyen to use sports and nondigital games as his examples, as they usually rely more on abstraction.² For example, in *Elden Ring* the visual appearance of an enemy is not merely a decoration but informs the player the speed and reach of its attacks. The shape and attack animations of the enemy's weapon suggest what kind of space its attack will affect but can also be considered aesthetic as such.

Nguyen's viewpoint is based on the analytic tradition of philosophy and draws heavily on philosophical theories of art and aesthetic experience. These discourses are not always strongly connected with the field of game studies and have more ties for example to philosophy of sport. I will not go into full details of his theory here and instead, for the sake of my own argument, assume that the act of doing something can be aesthetically valuable as such, independently from the aesthetic qualities of the object that is interacted with. I will next focus on Nguyen's formulation of layered agency in striving play, as it is the most relevant part of his theory in terms of rhythm.

Striving Play and Layered Agency

According to Nguyen, as arts of action games allow us to have aesthetic experiences of our own actions, which are guided toward a certain type of agential posture, sculpted by the game designer or designers. To appreciate such agency aesthetically, the player must focus solely on the practical task of the game, because striving for the goal is what produces the agency that is experienced as aesthetic. Nguyen distinguishes striving play from achievement play: In achievement play, winning the game is the player's proper end. In striving play, it is to have aesthetic pleasure from the experience of striving.

However, to have an experience of striving, the player must momentarily adopt winning as their proper end and strive to win just as fiercely as in achievement play but dispose of this end and lose all interest toward winning when the game ends. This allows them to appreciate the struggle and agential posture that ensues from the activity of striving. While one of my goals in *Elden Ring* was to defeat Malenia. In Nguyen's theory, as a striving player I adopted this goal only to enjoy the struggle itself. As an achievement player I also cherished the fact I won Malenia all by myself,

but I wouldn't have endured the frustrating process if it wasn't in some way pleasing as such.

Nguyen claims that the interested, practical attitude toward the goal of the game serves a disinterested, impractical end of having an aesthetic experience. Through this "impractical practicality" or "disinterested interestedness," games can be valued as art, says [Nguyen \(2019, pp. 439–440, 2020b, pp. 117–118\)](#), at least if we accept a Kantian demand of disinterestedness for art. Hence, my interest in defeating Malenia served a disinterested goal of appreciating the struggle itself. Nguyen uses a notion of agential layering to explain this situation: When playing a game, the player adopts a temporary agency that the game frames through its goals and rules. The player's enduring everyday agency is pushed to the background but can be brought back to foreground to judge how pleasing the gameplay is. According to Nguyen's description of the layering, it seems that the disinterested agency must be actively brought back for making an aesthetic judgment about the activity, which seems to also require momentarily withdrawing from the striving agency.

However, especially in multiplayer games this can also cause players to adjust their gameplay, which according to [Morgan \(2021\)](#) can water down the experience of striving. The notion of agential layering has also been contested; for example, [Patridge \(2021\)](#) argues that players can be simultaneously achievement and striving players. If players can have both winning and striving as their proper ends, they wouldn't need to layer their agencies and could instead genuinely strive to win and simultaneously appreciate their striving aesthetically. Regardless of whether agential layering is possible or not, there seems to be a discrepancy between agency as the object of aesthetic appreciation and the practical task that produces that agency. This problem highlights that as process aesthetics, playing games is about the continuous process of taking action, which cannot be suspended in a fixed form or an object of aesthetic appreciation.

Nguyen's psychology of agential layering relies on a loosely defined conception of agency, which he calls "intentional action, or action for a reason" ([Nguyen, 2020b, p. 18](#)). It is important to note that this refers merely to a style or manner of doing something: it is a restricted way of reaching a predefined goal. As solely related to the practical task of the game, it could be called mechanical agency in terms of [Cole and Gillies \(2021\)](#). There is not necessarily any freedom of choice included in this: even in a game which would provide only a single way to reach its goal, following such way produces an experience of agency. The mode of agency is predetermined, but the skill required to wield it is the player's own. However, such rigidity is quite rare in digital games, as most of them allow different playstyles, strategies, and tactical choices.

This kind of aesthetic experience of agency is elusive because it can only be experienced during the process of playing, which is always changing and resists fixation into singular moment of form. Especially in fast-paced games that demand a full focus on the challenge, it is questionable whether agency can be appreciated in the instant. Such an experience is probably not contemplated quietly but appreciated as a feeling or a bodily and affective sensation. Even if slower-paced strategy or

puzzle games could allow more time to contemplate the agential posture, it is not experienced in a momentary, fixed point but as a continuous process.³

Attentional State and Affordances

Nguyen describes aesthetics of agency through conventional terms, especially grace, elegance, and harmony. While he acknowledges that also negativity, for example cumbersome, awkward, or frustrating experiences, can be aesthetic, his account on the aesthetics of agency focuses especially on the notion of harmony.⁴ Nguyen distinguishes three types of practical harmony: solution, action, and capacity. The harmony of solution is available also to spectators of the action and is simply a way to overcome the practical challenge of the game. The harmony of action is available only for the player and is related to how engaging in the action and making decisions feels for the acting subject. The harmony of capacity is related to striving play and occurs when the player struggles at the limit of their capacity.

Among Nguyen's commentators, Peacocke (2021) has proposed an expansion to the practical harmonies. Peacocke is careful to distinguish phenomenal experience of objects from phenomenal experience of agency; actions are often accompanied by phenomenal experiences of objects related to the action, such as the feel and sound of the keys when typing with a keyboard. However, these experiences are not necessarily the same thing as the phenomenal experience of the agency of typing. Peacocke suggests that to act is to make something happen, to exercise control, wield a causal power, pay attention, and to make use of resources. Exercising agency often also involves making choices between options. Acting also involves normativity, valuing and responsibility. Based on this rudimentary elaboration of agency, Peacocke suggests that Nguyen's practical harmonies need expanding to capture the richness of human agency. She proposes three elements: emotions of agency, patterns of attention, and affordances. Emotions of agency include triumph, resignation, effort, pride, shame, frustration among others. Such emotions are directly related to how being an agent feels like.

Interestingly, Peacocke chooses Chopin's music as an example of the feeling of resignation. If agency as a medium of games conveys any kind of meaning, I think it occurs especially through emotions, bodily and affective states and not through verbal discourse. The effect of melody and rhythm in music are probably very close to how agency feels like, but they lack the feeling related to doing something and acting with one's own body, unless played by oneself. As already noted, Nguyen also thinks that dancing is a prime example for process arts. Digital gameplay has previously been connected to dance by Kirkpatrick (2011). However, Kirkpatrick's discussion draws from critical theory and does not focus on agency as the aesthetic form of games.⁵

By patterns of attention Peacocke refers to Nguyen's claim that in striving play, the player's attention is focused on the practical task, whereas unnecessary things are filtered out. A tennis player focuses their attention on the ball and the racquet and not on

the color of their shoes, for example. Similarly in Nguyen's example of mountain climbing, the climber focuses on such properties of the rock that enable their movement upward and not the color or smell of the stone. Peacocke claims that such patterning of phenomenal experience to a background and a foreground is also an aesthetically meaningful part of the experience of agency. In my view this is highly important regarding digital games, as they usually feature a distinctive visual aesthetic that on the one hand might not be related to the practical task of the game but on the other, also forms the interface through which players must enact their actions.

Even though the tennis player must also decide which visual stimuli are relevant to the game, patterning is different in digital games. In digital games, the player's bodily actions are enacted with a controlling device and do not correspond to the action that is represented in the game-world. In actual tennis, there is no such programmed representational surface and the player's physical actions correspond directly to their visual perception of the world. Even attempts of accurate simulation games tend to omit something of their models and moreover, most digital games would become arduous if they would aim for maximal verisimilitude. Hence in digital games the patterning of attention is a more complex matter because the difference between foreground and background is not as clearly cut and the relation between an action and its consequences in the game state is mediated by code. This distance between the player's actions and the corresponding on-screen events also produces a rhythm of its own.

Peacocke's last addition is affordances, opportunities for action. Things that are brought into foreground in the phenomenal experience of agency are particularly things that afford actions related to completing the practical task. Peacocke elaborates that appreciating the affordances before making any decision or action is aesthetically valuable experience as such and belongs to the aesthetic experience of agency. I would like to continue this thought by noting that in a game, affordances change constantly. Every action by a player or a computer that changes the state of the game produces new affordances that require new decisions. This results in a rhythmic succession of actions and their consequences.

The Rhythm of Gameplay

As my own expansion to Nguyen's aesthetics of agency I propose rhythm. This is not only an expansion of the practical harmonies but a more general elaboration of agency as aesthetics of temporality. Rhythm is a characterization of the changing gameplay situation and the player's reactions to it. It also captures the momentariness of the experience of agency. Moreover, as part of discourse, rhythm operates outside verbal signification, on the level of affect and the body. While such rhythms can be difficult to grasp theoretically, different forms of agencies have different rhythms, which produce different moods, emotions, and bodily sensations. The rhythm of gameplay is partly visible also for a spectator, just as a spectator can experience the rhythm of a dance

performance. However, the enactor of the action has a different access to the bodily and subjective experience of rhythm.

Rhythm is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to grasp, as it can be found anywhere where passage of time is involved. From a phenomenological perspective, rhythm can be understood as a constitutive part of sensory experience and the relationship between self and world (Levin et al., 2019). While some rhythms, such as the heartbeat, might not be valued aesthetically, rhythm in general has strong ties to aesthetic experience and different forms of art, especially to dance and music. In regard to games, there are multiple dimensions of rhythm, such as the daily rhythms of gaming routines. In this article I focus on the microlevel rhythms of interaction with specific game mechanics in contrast to wider-scale global rhythms of the gaming industry, which have been researched by Apperley (2010). Apperley uses Henri Lefebvre's (1992) notion of *rhythm-analysis* to investigate gameplay ecology and the relation between global and local rhythms in gameplay. He argues that the digital game ecology is polyrhythmic because encounters with gaming in everyday life are diverse, and because games and world resonate in varied ways (Apperley, 2010, pp. 28–29).

Apperley focuses especially on discussions of algorithmic control and cybernetic subjectivity, according to which the player must internalize the rhythms of the computer and consequently the ideological underpinnings of the code. This is connected to a more general concern about societies in which values and actions are guided by hidden and possibly even biased algorithms. According to Apperley, there is always a creative margin in gameplay. While the game ecology has a global rhythm, games are played in localized situations which introduce their own rhythms to the gameplay situation in terms of different styles and approaches to gameplay.

Instead of such a global scale or even localized everyday rhythms, I focus on the microlevel rhythms of gameplay actions. Costello (2018) has investigated how the intervals between player's actions and the game's responses generate rhythm, highlighting that rhythm has an expressive potential and can be used for temporal structuring of embodied gameplay experience. In this view, rhythm of gameplay is a game design principle that guides the flow of game interactions. Costello says that rhythm operates both on the macrolevel of gameplay experience and in the micro relations between actions and reactions. Instead of measurable rhythms, my focus is on a more abstract conception of rhythm as an organizing principle of the meaning generated through gameplay aesthetics.

The rhythm of gameplay arises from the constantly changing affordances that are present in every gameplay situation. When a player decides upon them and acts, the affordances change. The affordances given in a particular situation could also be called the state of the game if we follow Juul's (2005) characterization of games as state machines. Every action made by the player changes the game state. Digital games can also produce their own preprogrammed actions independently of the player and change the game state through them—for example Galloway (2006) has called these machine acts. In this way, rhythm in agency is not just the rhythm of the player's actions, but the rhythm of interaction with the changing state of the

game. Even if machine acts in digital games might not be truly random, they can be experienced by the player just as random as the roll of a real dice in a board game.

However, ultimately the rhythm of the computer is different than the one produced by a player. In an investigation of rhythms of gameplay as a reflection of a contemporary understanding of subjectivity, Väliaho (2014, pp. 116–117) argues that while computers function through predefined parameters and repetition, their human operators introduce variation and contingency. Through their skills and styles, players bring imperfections, interruptions, and randomness into the predictable functioning of the code. The game artifact is predetermined until a player enacts it bodily.

This reflects a more general difference between rhythm as fixed, organized form and dynamic, changing flow. Eldridge (2018) argues that rhythm refers both to the measurement of regular temporal patterns and the general organization of temporal phenomena as they unfold. Moreover, the site of rhythm is opaque: It can be regarded bodily and physiological, culture-specific, or even a universal phenomenon. Hence, it functions both as large-scale macroformal constraint and as small-scale microformal freedom. In gameplay, rhythm can be understood both as a constraint imposed by the gaming industry but also as the unpredictable and differing nature of gameplay. On a larger scale, rhythm can also be understood as the repetition of playing different kinds of games and acquiring different kinds of agencies. When a game frames a distinct agential posture, enacting that agency has a distinct rhythm.

Form and Flow: The Sense of Agency

In the following section, I suggest that the temporality of the aesthetic experience of agency can be approached with a notion of rhythm, which can mean both a recurring pattern and a continuous change. While especially musical rhythm is often understood in terms of repeating temporal arrangement, rhythm can also be irregular flow of changing patterns. Like agency, rhythm is a multifaceted and even contradictory concept that can extend to a variety of contexts with different meanings. I follow an interpretation of rhythm that stems especially from linguistics but has also strong philosophical connections.

While I do not take my resources especially from Lefebvre, his insights on the nature of rhythm and repetition are nevertheless valuable. Lefebvre says that rhythm is often confused with movement or objects and is given a mechanical tone. Rhythm indeed is repetition, but not identical because all repetition entails difference—absolute repetition is only a fiction of logic and mathematics. Even the law of identity ($A=A$) is only formal, as repetition of the A produces a first and a second A that differ from each other by succession. Lefebvre states that instead of excluding differences, repetition gives birth to them and thus forms the thread of time (Lefebvre, 1992, pp. 14–16). Similarly in the activity of playing games, all repetitions produce differences, for example through the development of the player's skills and styles. Difference is also crucial to agency, because an action needs to

produce some kind of change for the enactor to have agency (Muriel & Crawford, 2020).

Lefebvre's understanding of rhythm as differing repetition resembles Émile Benveniste's and Henri Meschonnic's distinction between form and flow. In a famous article *The Notion of "Rhythm" in its Linguistic Expression*, Benveniste defined rhythm as "...form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency; it fits the pattern of a fluid element, of a letter arbitrarily shaped, of a robe which one arranges at one's will, of a particular state of character or mood. It is the form as improvised, momentary, changeable." (Benveniste, 1971, pp. 285–286).

In an etymological investigation, Benveniste argued that rhythm did not originally refer to cadence and measure but to a momentary form during constantly changing movement. According to Benveniste, the Greek word *rhuthmos* stems from *rein*, which means to flow. However, *rhuthmos* has also been used to describe characteristic arrangement. After Plato, who conflated *rhuthmos* with *metron*, rhythm has more generally been understood as measured and regulated movement and has been associated with harmony (Barletta, 2020, pp. 30–33). In Benveniste's interpretation, the pre-Socratic conception of rhythm denotes a momentary arrangement of something that is constantly changing. This understanding of rhythm is radically different from the Platonic notion of rhythm as a recurring pattern.

Benveniste did not take this interpretation of rhythm further, but it has been continued by Meschonnic, who has expanded the idea from a question of linguistic form to the whole process of sense-making. For Meschonnic, language is not a product but foremost an activity of subjects against history, culture, and language (Meschonnic, 2019, p. 68). As human activity in general, discourse produces sense but not necessarily linguistic meaning. Instead of a word or a sign, the smallest unit of meaning is the entire enunciation. Language is not only signs or communication but also actions, creations, relations between bodies, and the unconscious—everything that cannot be managed by a theory of signs. According to Meschonnic (1982, p. 71, 2019, pp. 68–69), the sense that discourse as human activity produces is organized by rhythm. When understood as organization of sense in general, rhythm can have sense outside the sense made by words, which is highlighted especially in poetry. Although Meschonnic has not discussed games directly, gameplay is clearly a human activity that produces meaning and can hence be regarded as language in the sense of Meschonnic's interpretation of the term. The rhythm of gameplay is not merely a rhythm of the player's actions and the game's responses to them, but also a way for agency to have meaning outside verbal discourse.

The interpretation of rhythm as flow does not only provide a way to understand the temporal nature of process aesthetics. It also gives insight into the meaning or sense of agency, which is something more subtle than verbal meaning. According to Nguyen, the aesthetics of agency is unrelated to meaning in the strict sense of the term: It does not represent, tell a story, build a fictional world, comment our world, or convey philosophical notions (Nguyen, 2020b, p. 104). In other words, agency does not signify or

have verbal or conceptual meaning. For example, the agential posture of playing *Elden Ring* is not related to defeating demigods or fighting with actual melee weapons or magic. It is used to construct a fiction about such events, but the meaning of the agential posture itself is related to the sense of entering proper inputs in relation to on-screen events, making certain strategic and tactical decisions, and practicing self-discipline, for instance. As means of accomplishing the practical task of depleting the health points of an enemy, these actions do not generate meaning on the level of verbal language.

According to Meschonnic, rhythm operates outside and prior to the signifying function of language. Instead of form, rhythm is the organization of an ensemble; in discourse, rhythm is the organization of its sense, which is created by all elements of discourse, extending far beyond linguistic signs. Meschonnic is especially critical toward semiotics, which views discourse as a series of choices in a pre-existing system of signs.⁶ I suggest that there could also be more to agency than a choice between the affordances in each gameplay situation. If agency produces sense, it might not be related to the actions as such but to the rhythm of the changing state of the game. Rhythm characterizes how the whole agential posture in a game can be aesthetic instead of what singular actions feel like. Hence the agential posture of *Elden Ring* emerges from the reciprocal process of player's singular actions and the game's responses to them, which together form a rhythmic flow of perpetual formation of form.

Pajević (2019, p. 29) suspects that there is no direct application of Meschonnic's theory because it is an understanding of the world and oneself. It would be better to call it critique instead of theory, and critique is what offers—there is a strong poststructuralist tendency in Meschonnic's distrust towards the order of the sign which is not far from Jacques Derrida's critique of binarism (Pajević, 2019, p. 19). When investigating rhythm with Benveniste and Meschonnic, it is crucial to understand that while their analyses of the concept are oriented toward language and discourse, they refer to meaning making in general. Especially Meschonnic's notions of language and discourse extend outside verbal discourse to human activity in general. Therefore, it is possible to bring this understanding of rhythm in contact with process aesthetics as the organizing principle of human action in general.

While process and object aesthetics in gameplay might be impossible to distinguish from each other completely, a philosophical theory of rhythm can provide insight into the relation between the two and open a new context for discussing the aesthetics of agency. It is also important to notice that many process arts in addition to games have a rhythmic element, which naturally stems from the fact that a process is a temporal phenomenon. Neither process aesthetics nor the flow of rhythm have consistent form that could be captured by pausing them; they can be experienced only as the unfolding of temporal events.

However, it is difficult to describe what kind of meaning or sense rhythm generates in gameplay if it cannot be captured by words alone. An experience that is located outside of conceptual and verbal thought cannot be fully captured by the means of

language and writing. This is one of the fundamental problems of philosophical aesthetics and especially phenomenology, as the notion of aesthetic refers to the sensuous and unintelligible—at least since Immanuel Kant’s transcendental idealism, aesthetic experience has been thought to transcend the constraints of language and conceptual thought.

The tangible rhythms of gameplay arise from the interaction with the game artifact. While the predefined agential posture, which in Nguyen’s view is the message of the game, restricts the player into a certain rhythm, rhythm is also the organizing principle of the “language” of the game itself. Following Meschonnic’s characterization of language as not only communication but also as actions and relations between bodies, we can locate the language of games in the relation between the payer’s body and the game artifact, in the gameplay action itself. In this regard, games function like poetry, as they bring to the fore the rhythm in human agency itself. This also allows to distinguish between the representational content of the game, such as a game-world, fiction, or the character as a figure, and the aesthetics of practical action. Like in poetry how something is said can be more meaningful than the words alone, also in gameplay how the player enacts their actions can be more meaningful than their pictorial or narrative representations.

In *Elden Ring* there are multiple levels of rhythm, such as the rhythm of exploring the game-world or the rhythm of leveling up character attributes. I focus here on the rhythm of the combat mechanic, in which rhythm organizes both the actions of the playable character and of the enemies. Both the computational process that runs the game and the player’s action have rhythm and they react to each other in a dance-like process. Boss fights even resemble actual rhythm games, as the player must match their inputs precisely to the movement animations of the enemy. Player-versus-player combat is different, as human opponents do not have similar mechanical rhythm as computer-controlled characters and hence, their attack patterns cannot be learned in the same extent. Defeating human opponents depends on the player’s ability to learn the attack sequences of different weapons and ranged attacks, and the ability to negotiate with the rhythms of different players. While the game’s programming functions according to predefined parameters and human players are able to behave in a more unpredictable manner, the rhythm of gameplay is not only a question of the programmatic nature of the machine and the supposed freedom of human beings. Rhythm is rather in the process of play itself, regardless of whether it seemingly repeats a same pattern or produces differences. Rhythm characterizes how playing games is a temporal process that cannot be suspended in any singular moment or act as a signifying unit.

Viewed from the standpoint of Nguyen’s theory, the player’s agency consists of what actions the game mechanics allow to them enact. In the combat mechanics of *Elden Ring*, these consist of different types of movements of the playable character and attacks with melee or ranged weapons, and the use of consumable or throwable items. In the fight against Malenia, at any given frame of animation on the screen the player can choose to perform any of these actions, some of them simultaneously.

Different actions take varying amounts of time to be finished by the game engine, giving Malenia's programmed behavior room to react in different ways. The agential posture that this situation suggests is related to quickly recognizing the animations of Malenia's attacks and learning how to react to her different actions with a chosen strategy and playstyle. Ultimately this agency is the player's skill to execute inputs with their hands in sequences that are dependent on their perception of on-screen events.

Because the affordances in any given state of combat are diverse, many decisions of what action to engage in cannot be contemplated but must be almost automated through bodily responses. Some games, especially turn-based ones such as *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios, 2017), give the player more time to contemplate their next action—this does not remove rhythm from the gameplay experience but reduces its tempo. In fast-paced games rhythm becomes highlighted through the bodily demands of the gameplay situation, whereas in turn-based games rhythm can be slowed down to the extent it might become indiscernible. However, as agency is produced only through the process of play as a temporal phenomenon, it cannot be appreciated in a singular moment but only in the modulation of successive acts. A single decision in a particular state of the game can be judged aesthetically, but such contemplation requires halting the flow of rhythm into a stable and discernible form. For example, a singular action in *Elden Ring* is merely a push of a button for the player, regardless of what kind of action it represents on the screen. It cannot alone define the agential posture of the game, which emerges only in the process of repeating such acts in rhythmic sequences. Rhythm as what is aesthetic in the experience of agency provides a way to understand the temporality of process aesthetics in terms of successive acts, which could be characterized as formation instead of form.

Conclusion

A thorough investigation of the aesthetics of agency in terms of rhythm requires considerably larger amount of work than a single research article. In this text I have merely introduced a notion of rhythm from a philosophical context that is different to Nguyen's background and pointed to a connection between the aesthetics of agency and an interpretation of rhythm as a form in movement. Rhythm characterizes the aesthetic experience of agency as a temporal process that cannot be suspended into stable form.

Rhythm provides insight also into the nonconceptual meaning generated by agency. Agential postures are experienced primarily tacitly, for example through bodily sensations, feelings, and affects. Enacting an agential posture might be related to conceptual meaning by a player, for example by interpreting it through the game's fiction, but this does not mean that agency itself would have such meaning. However, especially in digital games the agential posture can be difficult to distinguish from the game's fictional content as they are deeply interwoven. Rhythm can provide a way to understand the sense of agency itself as the modulation of successive acts.

While rhythm is probably just as slippery a concept as agency, it also provides a way to understand this elusiveness more profoundly. As part of all phenomenal experience and temporal repetition, rhythm necessarily touches upon the experience of agency, but it is also deeply related to how the experience of agency is aesthetic. To take meaningful action in a predetermined way has a feel and a rhythm that are characterized by different ways of enacting the action. Games that allow players to choose between different kinds of playstyles, strategies, and tactics give also more room to rhythmic variation.

Such rhythms can be experienced aesthetically, similarly to the rhythms of music, dance, and poetry. This does not mean that games should be reduced to such forms of culture but highlights how gameplay overlaps with multiple areas of aesthetic experience. In games the player is also forced to adapt their rhythm to the demands of the game. The environment and rules of the game form rhythms by limiting what the player can do but at the same time allow improvisation and experimentation. The experience of agency is a flow of constantly changing affordances and decisions. Instead of a rigid form, it has form only in the instant amidst the constant change. As multiple gameplay sessions always produce a new experience of agency as the object of aesthetic appreciation, the experience has no persistence and must be repeated, creating another level of rhythmic repetition.

Especially in continental philosophy, rhythm has been used to characterize the formation of subjectivity, selfhood, and human existence in general (e.g., Hui, 2017; Lacoue-Labarthe, 1979; Lindberg, 2010; Meschonnic, 1982). While not within the scope of the current article, these connections provide a way to investigate the relations between the aesthetics of agency and the self. Playing games can affect the self in multiple ways but rhythm opens a way to understand the affective and bodily sense of self, unconscious styles and habits instead of intentional autobiographical self-fashioning. As rhythm has implications for subjectivity, being-in-the-world and theory of art in general, this approach opens up a way for further research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Koneen Säätiö.

ORCID iD

Johan Kalmanlehto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5311-6096>

Notes

1. By acting I do not refer to playing a role but only to enacting any kind of purposeful action.

2. In Nguyen's terms this might be related to a difference between striving and make-believe as the motivations for playing games, but in digital games also these motivations are often intertwined.
3. This problem is very close to the more profound problem of presence itself as always fleeting. Such connection already suggests that Nguyen's theory would benefit from a phenomenological viewpoint, for example.
4. For a more detailed investigations of the negative aesthetics of agency, see for example Johnson (2015), who uses Sianne Ngai's notion of *animatedness* to describe frustration in gameplay and Shinkle (2012) who uses Ngai's notion of *stuplimity* to describe how repetitive gameplay can combine boredom with awe.
5. Other research on the bodily and affective aspects of playing games (e.g., Ash, 2012, 2013; Anable, 2018) would also be relevant regarding how agency feels like, but cannot be explored further here.
6. In such theory also the subject is defined by this choice—Marxism views the subject similarly constituted by social relations, says Meschonnic (1982, pp. 70–71).

References

- Anable, A. (2018). *Playing with feelings: Video games and affect*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Apperley, T. (2010). *Gaming rhythms: Play and counterplay from the situated to the global*. Institute of Network Studies.
- Ash, J. (2012). Attention, videogames and the retentive economies of affective amplification. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(6), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412438595>
- Ash, J. (2013). Technologies of captivation: Videogames and the attunement of affect. *Body & Society*, 19(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X11411737>
- Barletta, V. (2020). *Rhythm: Form and dispossession*. University of Chicago Press.
- Benveniste, É (1971). *Problems in general linguistics*. University of Miami Press.
- Cole, T., & Gillies, M. (2021). Thinking and doing: Challenge, agency, and the eudaimonic experience in video games. *Games and Culture*, 16(2), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019881536>
- Costello, B. M. (2018). The rhythm of game interactions: Player experience and rhythm in minecraft and don't starve. *Games and Culture*, 13(8), 807–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016646668>
- Eldridge, H. V. (2018). Towards a philosophy of rhythm: Nietzsche's conflicting rhythms. *Journal of Literary Theory*, 12(1), 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2018-0009>
- FromSoftware (2022). *Elden ring*. Bandai Namco Entertainment.
- Galloway, A (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hui, Y. (2017). Rhythm and technics: On Heidegger's commentary on Rimbaud. *Research in Phenomenology*, 47(1), 60–84. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341356>
- Johnson, D. (2015). Animated frustration or the ambivalence of player agency. *Games and Culture*, 10(6), 593–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014567229>
- Juul, J (2005). *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. MIT Press.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2011). *Aesthetic theory and the video game*. Manchester University Press.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, P. (1979). *Le sujet de la philosophie (typographies 1)*. Flammarion.
- Larian Studios (2017). *Divinity: Original Sin II*. Larian Studios.

- Lefebvre, H. (1992). *Éléments de rythmanalyse: Introduction à la connaissance des rythmes*. Éditions Syllepse.
- Levin, K., Roald, T., & Funch, B. S. (2019). Visual art and the rhythm of experience. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77(3), 281–293. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12647>
- Lindberg, S. (2010). Onto-rhythmie. *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 108(3), 527–548. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2143/RPL.108.3.2056223>
- Meschonnic, H. (1982). *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage*. Éditions Verdier.
- Meschonnic, H. (2019). What is at stake in a theory of rhythm. In M. Pajević (Ed.), *The Henri Meschonnic reader* (pp. 66–114). Edinburgh University Press.
- Morgan, W. J. (2021). Game play, wholehearted engagement, and the good life. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 48(3), 356–368. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2021.1948337>
- Muriel, D., & Crawford, G. (2020). Video games and agency in contemporary society. *Games and Culture*, 15(2), 138–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017750448>
- Nguyen, C. T. (2019). Games and the art of agency. *The Philosophical Review*, 128(4), 423–462. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-7697863>
- Nguyen, C. T. (2020a). The arts of action. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 20(14), 1–27. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0020.014>
- Nguyen, C. T. (2020b). *Games: Agency as art*. Oxford University Press.
- Pajević, M. (2019). Meschonnic's theory of rhythm, his key concepts and their relation. In M. Pajević (Ed.), *The Henri Meschonnic reader: A poetics of society* (pp. 15–31). Edinburgh University Press.
- Patridge, S. (2021). Games, motives, and virtue. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 48(3), 369–379. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2021.1948340>
- Peacocke, A. (2021). Phenomenal experience and the aesthetics of agency. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 48(3), 380–391. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2021.1952879>
- Shinkle, E. (2012). Videogames and the digital sublime. In A. Karatzogianni, & A. Kuntsman (Eds.), *Digital cultures and the politics of emotion: Feelings, affect and technological change* (pp. 94–108). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stang, S. (2019). 'This action will have consequences': Interactivity and player agency. *Game Studies*, 19(1).
- Suits, B. (1978). *The grasshopper. Games, life and utopia*. University of Toronto Press.
- Väliaho, P. (2014). Video games and the cerebral subject: On playing call of duty: Modern warfare 3. *Body & Society*, 20(3&4), 113–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X14546057>

Author Biography

Johan Kalmanlehto, PhD, has studied continental philosophy, the formation of the self, the relation between the individual and community, and digital gaming. In his PhD thesis *Beyond the Figure: The Notion of Mimetic Subject Formation in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's Philosophy and Its Relevance to Digital Gameplay* (JYU 2019) he investigated the formation of the self by combining an analysis of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's texts on mimesis, representation, and the formation of the subject with digital media and gaming research. Currently Kalmanlehto works in University of Jyväskylä in a research project funded by Finnish Kone foundation *Aesthetic practices in the transformation of self and world*.