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A Moment in Digital Time

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26

A Moment in Digital Time Pause During Performative Gameplay

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Abstract

In digital culture, the pause in video games has evolved from a mere functional interruption into a complex act of temporal resistance. Far from being a mechanical convenience, it serves as a cognitive necessity and a performative tool that shapes player experience, narrative pacing, and audience engagement. Drawing from the traditions of theatre, music, and dance — where silence and stillness function as punctuation that lends depth and nuance — the video game pause emerges as a site of agency within the accelerated temporality of contemporary media.

As Schmalzer observes, pause menus “reveal computational modes of time and space that are always present in all aspects of videogame play” (2020, p. 2). In an era when Twitch viewership exceeded 20 billion hours and global gaming revenue reached \$187.7 billion in 2024; the cultural and performative dimensions of pausing have never been more significant. This paper explores the pause as cognitive sanctuary, dramaturgical device, technical affordance, and philosophical gesture of resistance.

Keywords: pause, performative gameplay, strategic gameplay, cognitive pause and somatic recovery

Pause across the Performative Arts

Bergson's concept of *durée* distinguishes the qualitative, continuous experience of lived time from the homogeneous, quantitative time measured by clocks and scientific calculation (Bergson, 1910, pp. 98–104). The act of pausing in games suspends computational processes, granting players temporal sovereignty and creating a liminal zone where experiential time asserts itself. Drawing on Taylor's concept of the repertoire as embodied knowledge (2003, pp. 20-21), the pause can be understood as a performative act in which meaning emerges through the withholding and resumption of action through timing, bodily stillness, and gestural latency rather than through stable textual or representational forms. Sontag describes silence as an active aesthetic strategy that operates through withholding, restraint, and refusal rather than expressive fullness (1967, pp. 3–10). Fischer-Lichte's work on stillness and temporal suspension as performative events that intensify presence and generate transformative feedback between performers and spectators (2008, pp. 38–45) helps us understand pausing as a performative act that produces meaning through temporal modulation rather than representational content. As a performative operation, pausing reconfigures temporality, redistributes relational expectations, and delays narrative resolution, thus contributing to the production of situational social and narrative realities rather than simply marking an absence of activity.

In music, the pause — or rest — is as essential as sound. Cage's *4'33"* (1952) radicalized the notion by presenting silence as performance, shifting the focus from composed sound to environmental listening. This aligns with Adorno's (1976, pp. 51-54) observation that musical rests punctuate time, structuring the listener's consciousness and preventing saturation. More conventionally, musicians use phrasing pauses to create anticipation and emotional resonance, echoing Aristotle's claim in the *Poetics* (1998/ca. 335 BCE, 1447a13–16) that rhythm and harmony are inseparable from mimesis, or the representation of human action.

In dance, stillness interrupts the kinetic flow, emphasising the embodied temporality of movement. Foster (2011, pp. 111-116) argues that pauses in choreography destabilise the expectation of continuity, foregrounding the dancer's vulnerability and presence. Bausch (2006) and Cunningham (1968; 2002) employ silence and suspension to create moments of heightened intensity, in which the absence of motion invites audiences to reconsider the ontology of dance as continuous movement in time, a conception critically interrogated by Lepecki (2006, pp. 15–18).

Thus, the pause in performance is not an interruption but a constitutive element: it organises rhythm, creates interpretive space, and resists the cultural imperative of constant

motion. As Cage (1961) demonstrated, silence itself is never empty; it is full of potential, awaiting interpretation.

Pausing in the Digital Realm

Early arcade games omitted pause function, reflecting an economic model based on continuous coin consumption. The introduction of a dedicated pause button with the Atari 5200 in 1982 marked a shift towards individualised temporal control. By the mid-1980s, titles such as *The Legend of Zelda* integrated pause into core gameplay systems, embedding it within role-playing mechanics. In competitive settings, pauses became strategic tools for disrupting opponents and recalibrating performance, while in online multiplayer games the absence or restriction of pausing reflects tensions between individual agency and collective temporalities.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, pausing during streaming and performative gameplay operates as a temporal disruption of predictive processing, generating short-lived information gaps that heighten anticipation and mental simulation (Clark, 2016, pp. 1–6; Gottlieb et al., 2019, pp. 559–563; van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2019, pp. 65–67). Professional players employ pauses as brief intervals for strategic analysis, cognitive recovery, or psychological pressure, a form of temporal mastery that parallels how actors and musicians use silence to shape meaning and attention (Campbell et al., 2018, pp. 7–9; Rink, 2002, pp. 35–38; Noice & Noice, 2006, pp. 564–566).

It is argued that pausing complicates the flow state, which is characterised by seamless action and diminished self-awareness (Shakeri Hossein Abad et al., 2018, pp.3-5). Gaming, however, often requires a form of engaged mindedness, a metacognitive readiness that can benefit from temporal breaks. Research on unconscious thought suggests that such pauses may enhance decision-making by allowing complex information to be integrated outside the limits of conscious deliberation (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006, pp. 101–104). Thus, far from undermining flow, pausing during game play can sustain it by regulating attention, emotion, and physiology.

Pausing during a gaming session typically entails a full halt of computational processes, producing a genuine temporal rupture in play; in single-player contexts, navigating pause menus situates play within an alternate temporal and spatial frame that reshapes the player's experience of time and action (Schmalzer, 2020, pp. 1–2). In multiplayer environments, however, unrestricted pausing introduces risks of exploitation, prompting developers to experiment with limited or consensual pause systems to preserve fairness and temporal integrity (Zagal & Mateas, 2010, pp. 848–850). Speedrunning communities further expand pause mechanics through techniques such as pause-buffering, which allows frame-perfect inputs and reveals the hidden temporal architectures of code (LeMieux, 2014, pp. 1–4; Newman, 2019, pp. 8–12).

Within a culture of constant acceleration and instant consumption, the pause operates as a form of temporal resistance. It reclaims presence and purpose against the imperative of constant engagement. Echoing Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, pausing enables players to exercise agency through reflection and recalibration within systems otherwise designed to capture and sustain attention (Foucault, 1988, pp. 16–18). This article examines pausing in performative gameplay, while suggesting that pauses in interactive media can also be understood as more than functional interruptions. The pause marks an intersection of cognition, performance, and philosophy, offering moments of reflection, structuring narrative and dramatic tension, and resisting the accelerationist logic of digital culture. Whether employed tactically, performatively, or reflectively, pausing reframes gaming from continuous consumption into a practice of temporal mindfulness.

Pause to Think, Feel, Understand, Decide and Relish

The physiological benefits of pausing extend beyond simple rest to include processes of emotional and cognitive regulation, as evidenced by research in performance psychology and neuroscience (Beilock, 2010, pp. 47–52; Altenmüller & Furuya, 2016, pp. 261–275).

The emotional regulation function of pausing is particularly important in high-stakes performance contexts, where heightened anxiety and stress can significantly impair performance quality (Yoshie et al., 2009, pp. 345–363). Gaming performers must manage not only the cognitive demands of gameplay but also social anxiety, performance pressure, and audience expectations. In this context, pauses function as brief intervals for emotional regulation and psychological recalibration, supporting both moment-to-moment performance and longer-term sustainability (Albulescu et al., 2022, pp. 6–9; Kou & Gui, 2020, pp. 1–4; Poulus et al., 2025, pp. 12–15).

Sustained attention and fine motor control in gaming can generate physical tension; as with other skilled performers, pauses enable somatic recovery and postural recalibration (Altenmüller & Furuya, 2016, pp. 261–275). Evidence from sustained attention research indicates that brief breaks restore attentional resources and reduce errors (Ariga & Lleras, 2011, pp. 439–443), suggesting that pausing in gaming similarly mitigates cognitive fatigue during prolonged or high-intensity play. The physiological dimension of pausing also intersects with broader questions of embodiment and technology. Gaming relies on a form of embodied cognition in which visual perception, motor control, and cognitive processing are tightly coordinated in real time (Clark, 2008, pp. 24–27). Pauses provide moments for this embodied system to recalibrate, supporting sustained coordination and optimal functioning across extended periods of performance.

Pause at Play

Contemporary esports provide rich empirical examples of strategic pause deployment in competitive gaming, demonstrating the practical application of theoretical frameworks around temporal control and performative agency.

In major tournaments like *The International 2021*, which featured prize pools exceeding \$40 million, teams strategically deploy permitted pauses not only for tactical discussion but also as psychological tools for disrupting opponent rhythm and managing pressure (*Esports Insider*, 2025). These practices demonstrate the performative dimensions of pausing, where temporal control becomes a form of competitive communication.

Modern competitive titles such as *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*, and *Counter-Strike 2* have developed sophisticated pause systems that balance individual team needs with match integrity. The 2024 *League of Legends World Championships* in London demonstrated how pause timing and duration can become significant factors in match outcomes, with teams using strategic pauses to break opponent momentum during crucial moments (*Esports Charts*, 2025). These examples provide concrete evidence for theoretical claims about pause as performative utterance.

Audience connection in gaming is often mediated through pausing. Professional players use brief pauses to analyse game states, evaluate options, or recover during moments of heightened intensity — practices widely understood to influence competitive outcomes (*Esports Insider*, 2025). Such temporal manipulation renders gameplay performative in a theatrical sense, as pauses, timing, and suspension function analogously to dramaturgical devices that structure action, shape audience anticipation, and organize cycles of tension and release, consistent with performance theory's treatment of games and play as enacted spectacle (Schechner, 2002, pp. 22–30).

Streaming contexts provide different but equally revealing examples of pause mastery, demonstrating the application of performance theory to digital media contexts. With platforms like *Twitch* recording over 20 billion hours watched in 2024, successful streamers have developed distinctive pause styles that become part of their performative identity (*Twitch*, 2024). The technical challenges of streaming — including issues with buffering, connection stability, and audience retention — have created new pressures around pause behaviour that extend beyond traditional gameplay concerns.

The development of browser extensions such as “Click to Pause” for *Twitch* reflects audience demand for greater control over temporal experience in streaming contexts (GitHub, 2024). These tools demonstrate how pause functionality has become essential not just for performers but for audiences navigating an increasingly complex media landscape where attention management becomes crucial for engagement. This technological response

to pause needs provides empirical support for theoretical arguments about temporal agency in digital environments.

While pausing can function as a powerful design and performance tool, its implementation in competitive online multiplayer games requires careful regulation to prevent exploitation, such as deliberate interruptions that disrupt gameplay flow and competitive balance (Zagal & Mateas, 2010, pp. 848–850).

Nevertheless, in many online cooperative games, pause functionality may be more feasibly implemented through constrained designs such as opt-in activation, limited duration, or mutual agreement among players (Schmalzer, 2020, pp. 41–44). In performative gaming contexts, pausing ultimately affords players greater control over pacing and narrative progression, emphasizing key moments and cultivating suspense in ways that structure entertainment experience (Hanson, 2018, pp. 112–115).

The emergence of pause-centric games such as *Superhot*, in which time advances only through player movement, signals new possibilities for pause mechanics as core gameplay principles rather than auxiliary functions. Such designs suggest future trajectories in which temporal control is more fully integrated into fundamental mechanics, giving rise to genres organized around the deliberate manipulation of time and attention (Hanson, 2018, pp. 118–121).

This evolution illustrates how philosophical concepts of temporal agency can be operationalized within interactive media design. This article has examined the pause in digital gameplay as more than a functional interruption. Across artistic, cognitive, and performative domains, the pause emerges as a site of agency, reflection, and temporal mastery. In competitive and streaming contexts, it operates as both a strategic tool and a dramaturgical device, shaping performance and audience engagement. At a broader philosophical level, pausing interrupts the accelerationist logic of digital culture, offering opportunities to recalibrate attention, regulate emotion, and sustain long-term performance. By foregrounding the significance of stillness alongside action, the pause reframes gameplay as a practice of temporal mindfulness — one that enables players and audiences alike to engage not only with purpose, but also with meaning.

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