

The Contextual Game Experience: On the Socio-Cultural Contexts for Meaning in Digital Play

Frans Mäyrä

Hypermedia Laboratory
FIN-33014 University of Tampere
FINLAND
frans.mayra@uta.fi

ABSTRACT

The experiences game players and other people have around digital games are not limited to the intensive, immersive ways of playing them. Therefore the earlier SCI model of gameplay experiences is not sufficient to cover the full range of game experiences. In this paper a more comprehensive model is presented by describing the multiple contextual layers that surround and underlie every encounter with digital play and games.

Author Keywords

player experience, gameplay experience, context, meaning

INTRODUCTION

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence available on how people who are not usually players of particular digital games – or games at all – actually end up enjoying the experience when they have been introduced with such games under suitable conditions. On the other hand, many of us have also experienced situations where it has been necessary to play a game that in itself we do not enjoy, in order to facilitate a social situation that is valuable for us. Taken into a more general level, such experiences point out how the significance of game is not limited to its formal characteristics, or its ‘core gameplay’, or its formally rule-defined interactions.

This short paper is a look into certain key dimensions or extensions of games where the experience of game is being qualified to a significant degree by factors that are not necessarily at the heart of the ‘gameness’ of a game (cf. Juul 2006). These aspects of digital play are important to consider in order to understand the systems of signification surrounding digital games in more comprehensive manner. It has also implications that relate to the way we conceptualise and define a ‘game’ in late-modern societies. It can be argued that only a small part of the game is actually captured by the rules that focus on in-game operations and mechanics, and that our ‘gaming contracts’ actually consist of complex, interwoven networks of different signification systems. Rather than a fully-rounded empirical study, this should be read as a theoretically and

methodically oriented background paper for player experience research.

ARGUMENT

Our earlier SCI model (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005) concerns what is happening during the performance of play, and it identifies three key aspects of player experience that respond to games’ specific holding powers: the sensory, challenge-based and imaginative types of gameplay immersion. (See Figure 1, below.) The role of ludic challenge is central, and the model is at its strongest in describing player experiences that occur among games that require time, dedication and skill to master. There exists both a great range of games that are designed to be casual (meaning here of mostly ease of learning and low levels of challenge) that ‘immersion’ is not generally the key concept in characterising the type of entertainment they mostly offer, and ways of playing and using games in other ways that are not immersion-focused.

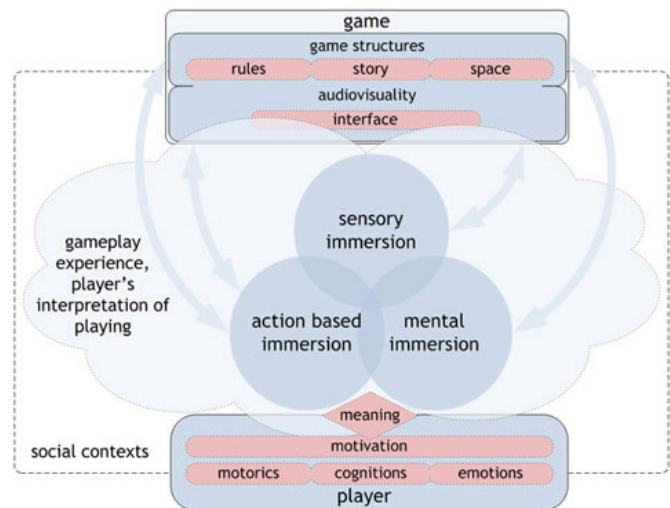


Figure 1: The SCI model of gameplay experience (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005).

The SCI model includes few contextual elements that attempt to take into account also the modifying effects of social context for play, as well as previous experiences that modify the way encounters with games are interpreted, but those were not at the key focus during the development of this particular theory and model. It was focused on typical, moderate to strongly immersive game experiences that our game player informants reported in connection of digital play.

During the last few years our work has expanded to include ‘non-classical’ gaming situations, including various game and play types that break or expand the ‘magic circle’ Johan Huizinga originally identified, meaning gameplay as that kind of activity that “absorbs the player intensely and utterly” and that proceeds within its “within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (Huizinga 1955, 13). Taking a closer look at the actual realities of play will reveal the ‘messy’ or ‘unorthodox’ character of games being played in an interlaced manner with all sorts of other activities, in non-absorbed manner, and even for other reasons than the ‘pure’ unmixed pleasure of game itself. A more detailed contextual approach on this varied and multidimensional game experience is needed, that would take into account the most important ‘extensions’ of digital play outside the core of rule-based gameplay.

The presence or absence of other people while playing is one of the most important sources of such modifying or extending factors: for example, it has been pointed out that playing with one’s friend is more engaging than playing alone or with a stranger (Ravaja et al. 2006). This social context is further expanded by taking into account the various situational factors that govern social situations. These are then further modified by the character of social formation that frames the play situation. For example, a tight family group typically carries with it deeper history of interactions than a group of more or less random strangers who just happen to play together a game e.g. in a party organised by a common acquaintance. Continuing this line of argument, game playing is serving different purposes when it is used to strengthen and maintain existing social relations as compared to when game session is organised in order to learn to know each other. When regarded in this sense, digital games have not traditionally supported as great a range of social uses as board games or parlour games. Typical party games, for example, are tailored to fit the situation; a game for 8-year-old’s birthday party may involve some form of scavenger hunt or fighting with air balloons, a karaoke style game may be a party hit among teens and elders alike, while a collaborative quiz game like *Pictionary* (Parker Brothers, 1985) supposedly helps to ‘break the ice’ from a social situation by putting participants to work together in teams. The enjoyment a particular game during a play session provides for its participants is essentially based on a context-sensitive equation where it is crucial to consider whether the purpose

of this event (which is always socially determined in character) and the interactions that game requires or supports are more or less in tune.

The social context of a particular playing situation, however, is only one of the many significant contexts that effect the meanings a particular game can hold or carry. Digital games are both cultural products and practices that need to be situated within the broader frameworks of culture and society. The significance of digital play does not appear in isolation, as games are created, distributed and participated (often also bought, and sooner or later rejected) within complex exchanges of meaning that have historical roots. These conditions will have powerful effect on whether a particular gaming encounter (Goffman 1961) will be enjoyable or not, and in what kind.

I will here introduce a model designed by cultural studies scholar Richard Johnson, whose treatise on the ‘Circuits of Culture’ attempts to capture the overall image of cultural signification processes. (See Figure 2.) The diagram consist of a circuit that includes the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products. In Johnson’s model each box represents a moment in this circuit, each of them dependent upon the others, and, as Johnson argues, indispensable to the whole, while simultaneously having its own distinct characteristics. (Johnson 1986, 46-47.) I propose here that a similar approach can be useful for better understanding the multiple dimensions or aspects of meaning that digital games have for their players and non-players alike.

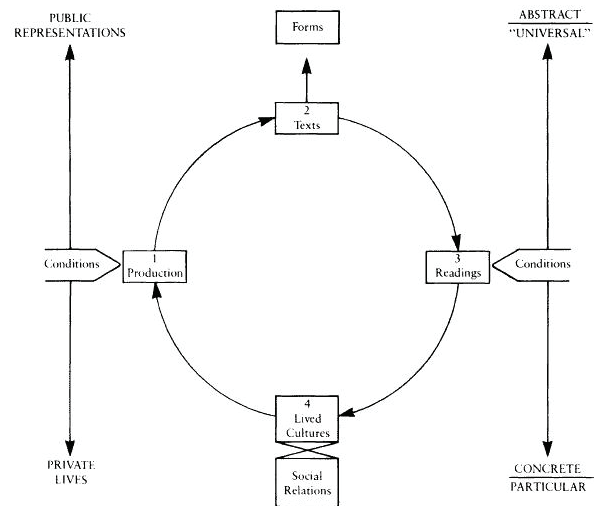


Figure 2: The Circuits of Culture (Johnson 1986, 46.)

The strength of Johnson’s model is that it identifies several key moments that hold also important roles for our understanding of how digital play is being produced and it thereby is helpful for making analytical sense of the complex contextual aspects of games’ significance. At the

same time, it needs to be modified in order to take into account the specific ludic nature of games and play.

EXAMPLES

It is useful to elucidate theoretical discussion with a concrete example, so let's introduce the recent case of Nintendo's Wii console (see Figure 3) entering the market and what kind of reactions it evoked among players and the general audience.



Figure 3: Nintendo Wii and the Wiimote controller. (Image copyright: Nintendo, 2006.)

For many Western as well as Asian digital game players Nintendo's name has at some point stood almost synonymous for 'video games'. This visible position has its roots in the mid-1980s when Nintendo emerged as a new powerful brand and industrial force in the cultural field which had previously been hit by the 'video game crash' of 1983-84, which strongly affected the game industry previously dominated by Atari and other North American companies. (See Sheff 1994.) Since then, many changes had had an effect on the digital games' market place, and Nintendo has been challenged by both giants in home electronics (Sony) as well as by the leaders of software industry (Microsoft). Competition on technological innovation, cost-effective industrial processes and even the individual aspirations of key game designers and leading manufacturers are all background for why Wii has entered the market in this particular shape and with these particular features it had evolved to hold. Referencing back to Johnson's model, such history has influenced the cultural conditions of Wii's production, and can be taken as a focus of analysis in research that unravels the important formative conditions that are usually mostly hidden from consumer view, but which nevertheless inform player experiences in contemporary, post-industrialised experience society.

Between the conditions of production and lived realities of social relations in Johnson's model is 'reading' which I will here replace with multi-dimensionally conceived 'gameplay.' By this I mean that any comprehensive view on players' and other game audiences' responses to game as a product need to include both configurative or interaction-oriented parts of their activity, as well as those aspects of games' reception which are driven towards their representational aspects. In this sense there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way of playing a game – just different ways of using it. Even a collector's response, meaning the process of acquiring games and not playing them but rather placing them as parts of a collection, is a valid 'reading' within digital games' circle of cultural meaning production. Obviously this particular way of 'not-playing' can hold powerful significance for certain individuals.

The games launched for the Wii console can be regarded as cybertexts (Aarseth 1997) which are linked with numerous ways to the history of ludic forms that is not restricted to the formal history of digital games. It is part of the particular dynamic of Wii's production, distribution and marketing launch that it was introduced as the "gameplay revolution" ("Revolution" was the concept name Wii was long known by), and as an obvious counter-reaction against the emphatically audiovisual supremacy represented by the main competitors Sony and Microsoft. Desperate to reach for the dominant 'casual' population, the third generation console manufacturers adopted different strategies, emphasising their games' links with the cinematic or televisual forms (Sony, Microsoft), or with non-digital ludic entertainment (Nintendo). Thus, Wii console was often sold as a part of a bundle pack with *Wii Sports* or *Wii Play* (Nintendo, 2006), which simulated and referenced back to classical, non-digital forms of play. *Wii Sports*, for example, includes sports games such as tennis, boxing, baseball and golf, that have been modified to be playable with Wii's novel, motion-sensitive controller, 'Wiimote'. The sports references in the ludic forms these early Wii games took thus actually repeat the gesture that was typical for the early, first generation 'television games': *Pong* (Atari, 1972) and numerous other early video games were designed to simulate tennis or some other sport in order to make it easy for the non-digital games literate audience to connect with the theme and action script of the game.

Thus, when it comes to the conditions of 'reading', and also playing Wii games, we have numerous both concrete or particular as well as more abstract or universal factors to consider. The player may respond to the public discussion or advertisement that represents Wii as a video game console for 'everyone', and then approach the game with related expectations – e.g. that the console and Wii games are not credible option for me (as a hardcore action gamer), or that I should really try it out (because of public discourse conveying gaming as something that 'everyone' should be able to do). When the player experience of a typical Wii player is considered in abstract and universal manner, one

may focus on the ways it differs from the experiences similarly themed games provide on other gaming platforms. The level and mode of physical exertion is one such obvious ‘universal’ gameplay feature in Wii games: they are supposed to be played with hand and possibly body movements that are in degree, if not in basic nature different from those required by the standard video games and controllers. The direct manipulation and body control skills required by Wiimote might also be considered as something more ‘universal’ than, say, the skills required by Sony’s Dualshock controller. The physical experiences of particular ‘exergames’ as *Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998) and also those Sony PlayStation 2 games that rely on pattern and movement recognition of the EyeToy camera auxiliary are an obvious point of comparison here, and they can be considered as precursors which may have prepared a way for the moderately physical Wii experience to get aimed for becoming a ‘mainstream digital gameplay experience’.

The more concrete level we reach in our research of Wii player experiences, the closer we come to the domain of lived cultures and existing social relations in Johnson’s model. Those immediately accessible events and performances nevertheless exist embedded within the wider socio-cultural reality, which contains also the production conditions and the more universal cultural and game experiential elements discussed above. We have, for example, witnessed more experienced gamers making the extra effort of carrying the Wii console over to the friends’ or parents’ house, introducing Wiimote style of playing to non-gamers. In our department playing *Wii Sports* together has actually become a sort of social pastime: also the personnel not professionally involved with games or games research is actively setting up such coffee-hour gaming sessions. The reason might be in the accessibility of enjoyable experiences during Wii style gameplay, or in the way digital play has become framed as something interesting and worthwhile in our culture and society – or, as is most probable, in both. The meanings that become realised during the lived realities of individual gameplay experiences are always enabled by the wider contextual framework that surrounds them.

A CONTEXTUAL GAME EXPERIENCE MODEL

The outcome of this discussion is the need to provide a new, more holistic model of game experience. This should be something that takes into account factors that go beyond the performance of some isolated player interfacing with digital game in ahistorical, supposedly neutral laboratory setting. Such model needs to link player experiences into both the personal historical and situational context as well as into certain more wider social and cultural contexts. There are many layers of signification in digital play that might remain hidden from a casual observer of player activities but that should inform any more comprehensive study of games. One way to conceptualise certain key elements in this process is presented below (see Figure 4).

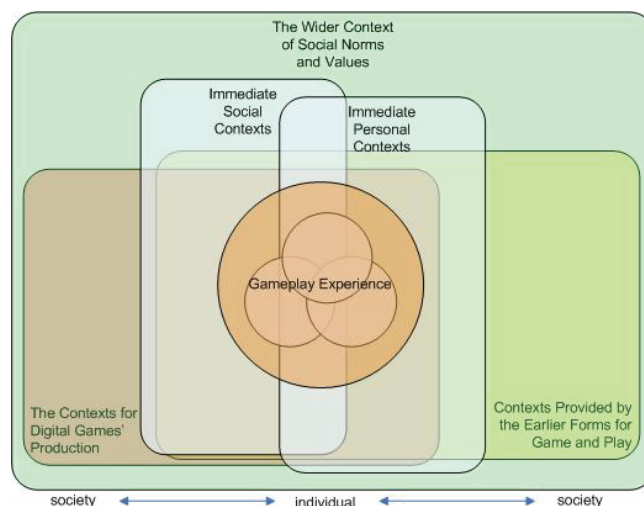


Figure 4: Contextual Game Experience Model

Rather than only ‘gameplay experience’ model, this is intended to stand as a step towards understanding more comprehensive game experience, and suggesting certain directions where to evolve our player experience methodologies. As any gameplay experience is intimately linked with the immediate personal contexts of digital play, it is necessary to learn to know our players better: how they play, what motivates their play – or aversion towards certain game forms. This is, however, just the most immediately accessible of several significant layers that filter and modify the formation of meaning in the multidimensional structure that game experience is here conceptualised to consist of. Closely interlaced with the immediate personal contexts are the immediate social contexts of play: how the closest people regard game playing, the immediate historical and situational reasons they provide for digital play to take this form within this particular context. Beneath this are the two important layers that expand the game experience along the contexts that the earlier forms for game and play have provided for ‘games literacy’ to be formed into certain forms among certain people, and, the contexts for digital games’ production. The most general structure that modifies any relation with games and play is the wide context of values, norms and ways of thinking in a society that affects everything taking place at the level of individuals and groups.

It is important to understand the interrelated and interwoven nature of these contextual dimensions in the overall game experience. For example, the context of earlier forms of play and games is influenced in many ways by the forms the production, distribution and marketing of digital games has taken. Looking back into our example of Nintendo games, it is easy to perceive how the commercial production of colourful digital games of mass appeal has modified how the history of player experiences has taken a certain shape. But it should be equally easy to perceive how

much of play practices and game forms have taken shape and remained outside the history of digital games' production. The need to launch Wii with yet another tennis game is a case in point. There remains a wide context for personal and social play experiences that are not directly sanctioned or derived from digital game industry, and the need to stay in dialogue with this wider experiential play context is important for manufacturers, too. The preferences and practices of digital play remain to be informed by non-digital play experiences and use contexts, and the richness of this broad range of contexts therefore needs to be researched, in historical and situational, general and particular level alike.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, this paper has outlined a contextual model of game experience, building a wider frame of reference around individual gameplay experiences. This paper has also argued that there are many reasons why we need a more comprehensive view on player experience as something that does not only take place during actual gameplay, but as a more comprehensive phenomenon. An overall game experience is always pre-defined, modified and post-defined by the multiple dimensions that are all parts of the networks of signification for digital play and games, in several general and particular levels. A better understanding of both the historical ("vertical") depth as well as socio-cultural ("horizontal") spread of these signification structures is needed, to focus our research appropriately.

There will be hopefully uses and applications for the contextual model presented in this paper, one of them being a better conceptualisation being prepared in its response. I nevertheless think that all gameplay or player experience evaluation methods need to be coupled with, and qualified by, more comprehensive contextual inquiries that take into account the historical perspective, as well as the public and private contexts of digital play. The question remains, at least for me, a genuine question worth debating, can such an inquiry be conducted in laboratory conditions, detached from the lived experiences and existing social networks that are the real testing ground for any game that enters life and culture in a human society? In this sense this paper is also hopefully an invite for more dialogue around player experience methodologies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has benefited from many inspiring discussions that I have had both within and without our games research group in the Hypermedia Laboratory at the University of Tampere, particularly with researchers carrying out game experience studies in IPerG, GameSpace and MEPE (Method for Evaluation of Player Experiences) research projects. A very special thank belongs to Laura Ermi, the main author of papers that outlined our original SCI model.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Aarseth, Espen (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Ermi, Laura & Mäyrä, Frans (2005) "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion" In: *Selected Papers Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. Vancouver: Simon Fraser University & DiGRA. Online: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.41516.pdf>
3. Goffman, Erving (1961) *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis (Ind.): Bobbs-Merrill.
4. Huizinga, Johan (1955) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon.
5. Johnson, Richard (1986) "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Social Text*, 16 (Winter, 1986): 38-80.
6. Juul, Jesper (2003) "The game, the player, the world: looking for a heart of gameness". *Level Up Conference Proceedings*. Utrecht: DiGRA & University of Utrecht, November 2003. Online: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.50560.pdf>
7. Ravaja, Niklas, Saari, Timo, Turpeinen, Marko, Laarni, Jari, Salminen, Mikko, Kivikangas, Matias (2006) "Spatial Presence and Emotions during Video Game Playing: Does It Matter with Whom You Play?" *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15(4): 381-392.
8. Sheff, David (1994) *Game Over: How Nintendo Conquered the World*. New York: Vintage.