Rules of Engagement: Influence of Co-Player Presence on Player Involvement in Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an empirical study of social setting as a determinant of player involvement in competitive play. We conceptualize player experience as comprising of components of involvement and enjoyment. Involvement relates to the attentional pull of games encompassing feelings of immersion, engagement and flow. Enjoyment taps into the fun and frustration of playing. A few recent studies indicate that co-players boost player enjoyment, yet the effect on involvement is still largely unknown. In line with enjoyment, involvement could increase with the sociality of settings. On the other hand, the presence of others provides a potential distracter and threat to involvement in games. Results of an experiment where social setting was manipulated within groups indicated that players' involvement remains constant or even increases when mediated or co-located co-play is compared to solitary play. Hence, co-players do not break the spell of a game, but become part of the magic circle. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Co-Player; Digital Gaming; Engagement; Flow; Game Experience; Immersion; Involvement; Player Experience; Social Presence; Social Setting

INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming has become an increasingly social activity. The shift from solo-play to multi-play introduced the social component of playing together—either in competition or in collaboration—with co-players. The widespread penetration of the Internet now allows for social play without the restriction of co-players having to be in the same room. As a result, digital games are increasingly played together with other people, who indisputably become part of the player experience (Nielsen Interactive Entertainment, 2005). However, this fact has not been considered in most of the player experience literature (Goldstein, 2007; de Kort & IJsselsteijn, 2008).

There are numerous reasons why the experience of playing with others differs from playing alone, many of which have their roots in the fun-
damental human need for affiliation, our need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Playing together implies interaction with another person, and perhaps even a relationship; be it weak or strong, temporary or long lasting. This alone makes the event meaningful. In addition, the presence of others may induce social facilitation, evaluation apprehension, and increased self-awareness, which impacts performance and affect (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981; Cottrell, 1972; Zajonc, 1980). Sharing experiences with others and recognizing similarities in terms of interest or affect is even more relevant socially and induces affinity and interpersonal attraction (Moreland & Zajonc, 1982) and engenders a strong feeling of belonging (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006). Moreover, affective states are affected by observable affective states of others through mechanisms of empathy and emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992), which may induce even stronger feelings of affiliation (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999).

With the presence of others comes also the potential for pride or shame over performance, and impression management mechanisms to save face in the case of potentially negative perceptions of one’s personality or capacities. Although this is clearly not a comprehensive overview of psychological processes that explain why social settings influence experience, it does illustrate that game experience cannot be restricted to the interaction between the game and the player alone.

Incorporating all these social processes and the way they impact on experience into player experience models is no mean feat, yet this does not free us from the need to consider the importance of social context in digital play. This impact is likely to vary with varying play settings such as solo-play, online play and multi-play, with interpersonal familiarity, and with players’ awareness of and potential to communicate with the other player(s). Recently, de Kort and IJsselsteijn (2008) introduced a framework considering the variety of social processes involved when games are played together, and how these impact player experience. Based on theoretical considerations, they argue that the degree to which other people play a significant role in player experience is shaped by characteristics of the social, physical and media setting. These characteristics shape the affordances for players to communicate and to monitor each other, and create a setting for co-player reinforcement. For instance, layout, furniture, and screen arrangements determine viewing lines between players in co-located settings, whereas the availability of additional communication channels such as chat functionality or an audio connection determine possibilities for meta-communication during game play. De Kort and IJsselsteijn furthermore argue that the influence of these affordances on player experience is mediated by the player’s awareness of and involvement with their co-player, stressing the relevance of social presence theory (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003) for understanding player experience.

Player experience can be usefully divided into player enjoyment and player involvement, where enjoyment relates to the amount of pleasure or displeasure a player experiences, and involvement is defined as the attentional pull of the game encompassing feelings of immersion, engagement and flow.

Recently, Gajadhar, de Kort, and IJsselsteijn (2008a) empirically demonstrated the effects of social context on player enjoyment, and its mediation via social presence. In line with a survey study that preceded this work (IJsselsteijn, de Kort, & Poels, in preparation), the results indicated that presence of co-players significantly adds to the fun, challenge, and perceived competence in a game and therefore influences player enjoyment. Results of social effects on player involvement on the other hand have not been tested empirically yet. Some have suggested that others present may distract players from the game and potentially break their concentration (e.g., Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005), yet the popularity of social play appears to contradict this. This article therefore focuses on experiential components describing a player’s involvement when a co-player is either absent, co-present, or online, during digital game play.
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