

Chapter 9

Rule of Engagement: The Presence of a Co-Player Does Not Hinder Gamers' Focus

B. J. Gajadhar

Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

Y. A. W. deKort

Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

W. A. IJsselsteijn

Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an empirical study of social setting as a determinant of player involvement in competitive play. We conceptualize player experience as roughly 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 with mediated or co-located co-players compared to solitary play. Hence, co-players do not break the spell of a game, but become part of the magic circle.

INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming has become extremely popular across North America, Europe, Australia and Asia (Tan & Jansz, 2008). Simultaneously, digital

gaming has also become a more and more social activity. There has been a strong shift from solo-play to multi-play options, and 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

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other people, who indisputably become part of the player experience (Nielsen, 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 fundamental 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 lasting. This alone makes the event meaningful. In addition, the presence of others may induce social facilitation, evaluation apprehension, and increased self-awareness, which impact on performance and affect (e.g., Cottrell, 1972; Carver & Scheier, 1981). Affective states are affected by observable affective states of others through mechanisms of empathy and emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992), which may induce strong feelings of affiliation (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Moreover, sharing experiences with others and recognizing similarities in terms of interest or affect induces affinity and interpersonal attraction (Moreland & Zajonc, 1982) and engenders an even stronger feeling of belonging (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006). On the other hand, 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 how social processes become significant when games are played with others, and how they impact on game 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 room 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 players' awareness of and involvement with their co-player, in other words their experienced level of social presence.

In line with this view we prefer the term *player experience* to *game experience*. It indicates the experience not only as a result of playing the game, but also as a result of playing it with others and in a particular context. Player experience is a broad term, which can be roughly subdivided into player enjoyment and player involvement. 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 & IJsselsteijn (2008a) empirically demonstrated the effects of social context on player enjoyment, and its mediation via social presence. The results indicated that presence of co-players significantly adds to the fun, challenge, and perceived competence in a

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