

The Virtual Real:
A Look at Games and Community in the Digital Era

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Abstract

This analysis looks at games and how they have drastically changed since their inception as a simple pastime. Children's games gave way to more complex systems focused on rules and with the arrival of the digital age the rules started being enforced by computers. This radically changed interactions between players, and as the cost of technology continues to fall, people will be given greater opportunities to experience these new synthetic worlds. This paper examines the new kinds of connections that are created when people are given the opportunity to interact in a dynamic game setting with thousands of other people without being required to ever see their fellow player. It emphasizes the notion that even though it may be play, it is still important.

Recreational time is spent in a wide variety of ways. Everyone has a pool of things they do for enjoyment. Many people rank games as a major pastime. To examine what this means Weinberger (2007) writes:

Wittgenstein, one of our most imaginative philosophers, famously asked about the meaning of “game.” Scrabble, poker, solitaire, football, bingo, and a child counting how many times she can catch a ball she’s thrown into the air are all games, but they have no single feature in common, and thus no definition works perfectly to include everything we consider to be a game. Instead, Wittgenstein said, games have a family resemblance: Carl has the family chin, Carla has the family eyes, and Carlita has the family ears, but no family feature is present in all those who share the family resemblance. In the same way, some games have teams, some have winners, some have rules, but there is no single set of features they all have, and thus there’s no Aristotelian definition of “game.” Nevertheless we all know what the word *game* means. So apparently we can know what something means even if it can’t be clearly defined and even if its boundaries cannot be sharply drawn. Rosch realized that concepts can be clear without having clear definitions if they’re organized around undisputed examples, or prototypes, as she calls them. That’s as radical a thought within cognitive psychology as Wittgensteins’s family-resemblance theory was within philosophy.

(p 161)

In his book *Half-Real*, Juul (2005) records the changes in the definition of “game” over the past half century:

Table 2.1
Seven Game Defintiions

Source	Definition
Johan Huizinga 1950, 13	[...] a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means
Roger Caillois 1961, 10-11	[...] an activity which is essentially: free (voluntary), separate [in time and space] uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe.
Bernard Suits 1978, 34.	To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.
E.M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith 1971, 7.	At its most elementary level then we can define a game as an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequibrial outcome.
Chris Crawford 1982, chapter 2.	I perceive four common factors: representation [“a closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality”], interaction, conflict, and safety [“the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models”].
David Kelley 1988, 50.	[...] a game is a form of recreation constituted by a set of rules that specify an object to be attained and the permissible means of attaining it.
Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman 2004, 96	A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome

Using the word “game” is both complicated and simple. It is a broad term that has mutable definitions based on the times and user. What some would call a game others could easily call labor. Questions such as “must rules be written down and how are

conflicts in rule wording solved?” are not easy questions to answer. Even when focusing on a particular game, the rules can become an issue, Fine (1983) demonstrates this by examining the complications that can arise during a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*:

Fantasy role-playing is not always placid; players and referees often argue and bicker about a logical point or technical nicety in the rules, as each attempts to dominate the other in a continuous struggle for influence. Although theoretically the referee is in charge, most referees are not totally domineering and disputes do occur. In disputes the players, usually selfishly out for their characters, try to convince the referee that they are correct – by means of reference to history, the rules, or “common sense.” (p 106-107)

This arguing with fellow players and referees works when directly interacting with them, but with the advent computers, the referees of the games stopped being people, this caused interesting developments. Since these early games were expensive and featured mainly in arcades or diners the social aspect was still present. People would come to see a good player roll through levels, and encourage their friends that weren't as good to get better. Yet another interesting usage of video games was for rehabilitation of those with brain damage and those born with mental handicaps. This was assisted by the new home video game consoles of Atari and Commodore 64, which were just starting to make headway during the mid 1980s. (Price, 1985, p118-120)

As these home consoles grew in popularity the effects on the player became more interesting. Whereas previously the video games were still social endeavors due to the prohibitive cost to personally own one, these home consoles and video games,

while still expensive for the time, appeared to make games less social - and yet, Selnow (1987) notes:

Not only may the child escape into the idyllic world of the video game, but I may be argued based on these observations, that players in this electronic environment see themselves as active participants in the action. The strong relationship between the action factor and respondents' involvement with video game suggests that for heavier users there is more agreement that the games enable the user to become a member of the cast. While at the controls players are transported from the sidelines into the arena where they are under the spotlight and in center ring. (p 58)

This type of interaction was lacking a human element, but it didn't take long for that to change again. With the increasing popularity of home consoles and computers, video games continued to grow and change. Soon games featured online aspects and the ability to communicate with other players from within the game, or web sites dedicated to those games. However the biggest leap came in the later half of the 1990s, as Castronova (2005) writes:

Today, of course, most synthetic worlds are considered games, and the term used to describe them – prepare your tongue, this won't be easy – is MMORPG. This jawbreaker (I pronounce it “mor-peg”) emerged from a game industry practice that refers to games like *Dungeons and Dragons* as “RPGs,” for “role-playing games.” Specify an RPG as an online game, and it becomes ORPG. Such a game with multiple players is a MORPG, “M” standing for “multiplayer.” Around 1996 the industry acquired the technical capacity to expand the number

of players from a then-ordinary number (8-16) to what was considered a very large number (3,000-4,000), and the term “massively multiplayer” was coined. MMORPG, for “Massively multiplayer online role-playing game,” has become the standard term of reference for all synthetic worlds – a development only the pentagon (and some university administrators) would admire. (p 9-10)

These MMORPGs, or as Castranova puts it “synthetic worlds” offer players an interaction with a large number of people without leaving the game world. Thousands of inhabitants, doing practically the same thing, with the ability to communicate to each with one another – an evolution that is both perplexing and awe inspiring in its form. Many social issues can be identified within these synthetic worlds, such as player connection to the synthetic world and the others within. Player identification with their avatar, their representation in the game world, starts rather quickly, right at the character creation screen where many people find themselves referring to stats or appearance as “theirs.” Nonetheless, on a practical level people will admit the characters are just bits and bytes of data. (Castranova, 2005, p 32-33)

Many players find themselves committed to the synthetic worlds in which they play, there are complex social structures within the player base and some people throw yearly conventions to celebrate the MMORPG they play. These are often events where groups of players, commonly referred to as guilds, meet for the first time outside the game. These types of meetings are sometimes covered by the media in an almost mocking fashion, as the concept of “virtual” communities being so important is a notion the public at large apparently cannot grasp. The public shuns these non-traditional social groups while continuing to herald the hunterer gather tribe or government as

somehow more real, even though they are just as imagined as these “guilds” founded inside a game. As a result, arguing whether or not a “guild” in a synthetic world is real or not meets with poor results as the answer comes back to a resounding yes, with the qualifier that the social groups in the “real” world are just as imagined. (Willaims, Heindrcks, & Winkler, 2006, p 160-161)

The designers of these synthetic worlds are still responsible for implementing the “game” elements to go with this social experience. So a poorly designed game capable of connecting many people will not be popular. Yet, if the community is the major focus, as many of these MMORPG creators insist it is, why can't a synthetic world with poor gameplay elements rise up like the rest? This can be attributed to the emergence patterns of the game. Some games can be different with every play, yet be rudimentarily simple. They can be deeply focused on a particular pattern or set of patterns that must be known in order to achieve a goal. Games can be produced as offshoots of other traditional games by discovering new elements previously unseen or unnoticed. Gameplay can also be developed through irreducibility. This is most important in video games where making it so there is no work around besides actually playing the game (i.e. there is no jump to the ending button) is an important goal. (Juul, 2005, p 80-81) However traditional games are much like this too, rarely do teams assemble to play football and simply declare a winner.

So the gameplay is important, but the social aspect is still the primary lure to these games. Ducheneaut, Yee, & Moore (2006) researched the player interactions and views in the game *World of Warcraft* and found rather interesting results:

When asked about the reasons behind their attraction to MMORPGs, most players answer by mentioning “the social factor:” it is the presence of other people in games’ worlds that sets them apart [12, 16, 26]. Studies of earlier MMORPGs refined this picture by emphasizing the importance of joint activities and time spent in groups [8]. However our study of WoW shows that grouping may not be what most players are after. Indeed, a large number of players stay outside of groups for most of their tenure in the game. Of course, we know that not all players enjoy socializing [1]. Still, considering how large WoW’s population is, the lack of grouping cannot be entirely attributed to playing styles.

These numbers, complemented by our ethnographic observations of the game, have led us to a different definition of the role of other players in MMORPGs. While many of WoW’s subscribers play alone, we believe they prefer playing a MMORPG to playing a comparable single player game because of a different kind of “social factor.” Indeed, the other players have important roles beyond providing direct support and camaraderie in the context of quest groups: they also provide an *audience*, a sense of *social presence*, and a *spectacle*. We believe these three factors can help explain the appeal of being “alone together” in multiplayer games. (p7)

So in a way this interaction is a return to the days of the arcade. Players are able to show off their abilities at a game in a forum where others are interested. They can shine within the game and show off to those who care. This broadcasting of abilities creates the social dynamic given so much credit for the genre’s success. A validation to

the players and creators that while they are alone, they are connecting with others, even if it is only when they want to.

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