

Enacted Sociality in Single-Player Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Presented in this abstract is the idea of enacted sociality as an afforded form of social processing in single-player games. In game studies, notions of the practices and activities of play with single-player games often focus on a larger media ecology (Salen 2008). Playful engagement in game studies often represents play as autotelic and a self-prioritizing activity (Masek & Stenros 2021). And while some view play as an inherently social act (e.g. Consalvo et al. 2018; Stenros et al. 2009) the literature regarding single-player gameplay rarely accounts for social practices in a solitary play setting. Granted, players of single-player games may still be influenced in their game/player relationship by surrounding societal and cultural contexts, and an inherent sociality is arguably true in expressing forms of identity in gameplay (Boudreau 2012; Gee 2007). Yet the establishment and development of sociality itself with and within single-player games and solitary play remain somewhat under-exposed empirically. Playing single-player games is not inherently a person-to-person act and does not require a sociality defined by inter-relational aspects in neither physical nor digital contexts.

This research uses data collected from a previously conducted project concerning player reflections in play with *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009). This abstract is based on a follow-up analysis of the data and focuses on specific findings of players' social behaviour and development in play with the game. Individual video-elicited interviews using the participant's own gameplay footage were conducted with five players, all playing the game for the first time. Participants were Danes aged 22-35 (two men, two women, one non-binary). The gameplay situations shown in the interviews centred around moments of conflict, pause, and radical actions, and primarily pertained to ethical dilemmas in dialogue situations within the game (see Jong 2012). Each interview contained five to six video situations and lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes on average.

Utilizing transformative learning theory in terms of social learning (Illeris 2017) in conjunction with theory on play as an existential activity (Sicart 2009; 2014), the analysis finds that sociality is steadily built and developed as the individual player co-constructs the narrative of the game. This happens as a result of carefully considered interactions based on increasing functionality and sensitivity/sensibility to the gameworld. The complexity of the social interactions with the NPCs increases as the narrative is internalized and invoked into increasingly comprehensive internal processes in morally questionable situations.

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This development of sociality rests on the player's path in navigating moral dilemmas in coherence with their own ethical conviction, along with a strong sense of worldness (see Tosca & Klastrop 2019) that erases the digital nature of the interaction. The concept of NPCs did not naturally emerge in the interviews, and neither were the companions (the stable party formed during the game) ever thought of as anything computational. In play, the NPCs were experienced as full persons with motivations, feelings, backgrounds, and human purpose. Upon reflection in the interviews, the participants recognized the computational nature of NPCs, yet this was explicitly never a part of their reasoning processes in the recollection of experiences from the gameplay itself. Notions of otherness or role-play in terms of the playable figure were very rare after the character creation process.

The players' physical-world sociality is present in the play, nuanced and guided by the game as a material, social and cultural environment. This leads to complex co-created processes of social evaluation. The sociality of the player is influenced by the sense of worldness, seen here as the player's internalization of the fiction (Klastrop 2008; Mortensen, 2018) towards continued social behaviour, and thereby play with and within the gameworld. Even in transgressive play (although rare in the data) lies the underlying codes of sociality of the individual which are challenged (e.g. Aarseth 2014; Mortensen, 2015), and negotiated internally into the playful engagement. This is not simply done, performed, or acted in a vacuum. On the contrary, both primary and secondary socialization were identified as underlying emotional compasses guiding the processes of decision-making towards individually sustainable outcomes.

The findings lead to the term "enacted sociality", as sociality only constitutes the state of being social. Action is imperative for games to progress and be played (Frasca 2003) which must be combined with the co-creative element of the player's already established codes of social behaviour transferred into another, yet equally real world through an internal negotiation. Enacted sociality thereby represents the impetus that games present in a contextualized reconfiguration of social norms relational to the action imperative. Enacted sociality (as Illeris describes learning structures generally) is based on the integration between the external material, social and cultural environment, and "[...] an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition" (Illeris 2018, 2). The elaboration in gameplay being the incorporation of both personally- and game-related memories in the processing of cognitive and emotional aspects of the game situation at hand, within a state of play. Enactment of sociality in single-player play is thereby not only a continuous state of being social. It is processes of subject-oriented contextualisation based on underlying day-to-day convictions, leading to implicit and explicit contexts of understanding and self-applicability (Ziehe 2018).

Not all single-player games are likely to incite enactments of sociality. Adrienne Shaw for example finds lacking identification and investment in certain games (2011) and Kristine Jørgensen presents how different characteristics of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010) can evoke involvement or deny it (2010). However, this research shows possibilities of questioning sociality and single-player play practices in novel ways, as this investigation identified moments of enacted sociality and development within the gameworld based on cognitive and emotional processing. The determinants and circumstances of this development are likely limited and guided by the game in question, and *Dragon Age: Origins* presents a seemingly strong impetus to engage social thought and emotion which is not universal across digital games. On a broader scale, further questions arise toward potential preconceptions of sociality, pro-sociality and even transgression in the hidden play practices of single-player games.

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