

Single-Player Digital Games: Hegemonical, Dialogical, or Critical Agents in Identity Formation

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Abstract: In terms of play with a single-player game and the habitual solitary play experience, there are only few indications as to what might constitute identity development within this practise. This paper asks, how identity may be constructed, maintained, or developed in the practise of playing, and how this can be indicated in play with single-player digital games. Namely, the goal is to decipher games' pedagogical inclinations along with the players' positioning in these towards learning processes which may establish a frame of identity development potential. This is done via the concept of transformative learning situations in gameplay as potentials of identity formation. This, in terms of both the sociocultural and constructivist implications of engagement with a game as culturally situated artifact, and the pedagogical view of these in relation to the practise itself. While this paper is a theoretical discussion around the single-player play-practise with single-player digital games in combination with literature on identity, the discussions are closely linked to the intricacies of qualitative studies on and of these phenomena. For this reason, the focal points of the discussions are centred on re-evaluating assumptions of research and methodological issues towards the cultural play-practise of identity and play. In this sense, the paper poses issues and questions towards utilizing learning theory to study games, and vice versa, while also providing questions towards assumptions in studying games and identity development through learning. The discussion points are linked to Game Based Learning as they open a view of learning that offsets from transformative learning theory specifically. This, while simultaneously focussing on the relational and pedagogical aspect of identity formation in a practise which is often overshadowed by games with an immediate social nature and their more observable interactions. In this, the paper concludes towards attention on methodological issues in player studies by highlighting the intricacies of learning and development processes in habitual solitary practises.

Keywords: Play-Practise, Learning and Identity, Transformational Learning Processes, Single-Player Games, Solitary Play, Identity play.

1. Introduction

The single-player play-practise with digital games is both relevant and prevalent in society. It is however also a practise, that has many hidden elements differentiated by both individual practises and activities, and individual sociocultural frames. This situated and individual habitual play-practise is difficult to distinguish in the mesh of play-practises around variations of solitary and social practises, and difficult to research by nature of the many variables the practise itself may entail. However, this conundrum of a practise is perhaps also where we may see the most explorative and transgressional play in terms of individual cognitive and emotional processes, as the solitary activity affords a field where the player, in relation and activity with the game, is not bound by specific social rules. This paper seeks to frame this play-practise, in terms of what might be constitutional to identity development in single-player gameplay and the intricacies of researching such complexities. This is done from an inter- or transdisciplinary perspective, which in itself poses significant issues towards stable contributions towards any given disciplinary discourse or paradigm (see for example Leavy (2011)). The theoretical predisposition is, that identity development is based on learning processes taking place in the interaction with the game. The frame of learning theory I largely leave at a surface level, instead focussing on the relation between the player and the game towards identity play. Suffice to say however, that transformational learning

theory is the basis for claiming that learning processes in gameplay may lead to identity development. As Jack Mezirow states in terms of transformational learning “We transform our frames of reference through *critical reflection on the assumptions* upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based.” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7 original emphasis). As such, transformational learning happens in the reflective processes that are instigated through interaction with the world. What makes it interesting to view games and identity in this learning theory perspective, is that it may focus the attention towards the player as a subject of transformation through learning, and the game as a pedagogical agent towards the learning processes themselves. Notably, the play-practise, theoretical frame of identity, and pedagogical relation of gameplay leads to questions about the endeavour of researching these topics. This paper focusses on theory around the adult situation but does not exclude that findings may be equally important towards adolescents or other constructs of learners.

2. Play-practise and play with identities

Jakko Stenros and Annika Waern (2011) argue, that shying away from either the design of digital games or the activity required to play them creates fallacies in our interpretation of both. In this argument they refer to “play activity” as a basis for understanding the player as the main driving force in the interactive nature of digital games. As Stenros and Waern put it, the activity of play with a digital game is an enacted experience, based on a play session that is dependant on human agency. In this lies the game as second order design, as the designed affordances of the actual game cannot in themselves account for the experiential and explorational nature of a player’s mental processes while playing. The “game as a system” quite simply cannot account for the players intent and incentive to experience it though play, which means that the activity must be seen as a reciprocal enactment of a situated reality. Here lies the potential for playing with identities, unbound from the potential control of the player’s sociocultural sphere, yet still influenced by it through the game’s designed affordances and potential to evoke sociocultural representations.

The play-sessions over time create the practise in that they frame both the temporal, spatial and perceptual importance of play with these digital artefacts as a part of the habitual lifeworld of the individual. Sessions also determine the nature of the potential sociality enacted based on these perceived experiences and their importance. So while all play, even that of the single-player play-practise may be seen as an inherent social practise (Stenros, Paavilainen and Mäyrä, 2009), play sessions can, and often will, precede the social engagement of affinity spaces, a term I borrow from James Paul Gee and Elisabeth Hayes (Gee, 2007; Gee and Hayes, 2012). These spaces are both numerous and varied: Reddit on specific games, various game forums, player collectives such as guilds/clans, modding communities, and many more. However, they only represent the active and vocal engagement of a specific segment of players. As such, these spaces are informative towards the specific “gamer” identities afforded by the game, the community/collective that may form around a game, and the platforms they operate on. They do not necessarily or naturally represent those who are not actively

and socially engaged in these paratextual activities. However, the term gamer is a certain identity construction in relation to games, and may illuminate other identity structures at play in the practise.

As Grooten and Kowert (2015) depict in terms of “gamer” identity, the player holds certain identity-related attributes and self-identification, which need to be connected to the community, be it on- or off-line. A central point of their article is that it takes time and self-oriented processes for any given individual to recognise themselves as a “gamer” in contrast to someone simply playing games. Likewise, this gamer identity is a sociocultural construct that indicates active participation into virtual worlds (and the physical world in some instances). So, while the term “gamer” does not indicate the identity related attributes of an individual, it does indicate that the individual mobilizes identity structures of the self in the act of playing. These structures are then put in relation to cultural and social structures that the player identifies with, such as sociodemographic backgrounds. Grooten and Kowert also mention the “overall socialisation” as a factor in the identity development towards “gamer”, which raises interesting questions. Namely, in relation to adults, that primary socialisation may lead into the play-practise in which secondary socialisation may occur. Outside of the sphere of the gamer identity, the question is to what extent the player may enter into what Jack Mezirow calls the critical-dialectical discourse (2003), towards transformations based on their own critical self-reflection or reflective judgement.

This contextual identity and game relationship is not entirely new within games studies, as interest in identity- and role-play has yielded empirical evidence of such for some time. For example, Sherry Turkle draws reference to the psychosocial moratorium from Erik Erikson’s psychological development theory (Turkle, 2005) in finding deeply personal enactments of identities in games which reflect the individuals’ lifeworld and experiences. Adrienne Shaw has examined the role of representations and identification in digital games in terms of gender, race, and sexual identity (Shaw, 2012), concluding that designing towards these identity structures should focus on the game as a medium, not as a means of audience construction. Notably, Shaw finds the identification with characters and avatars to be highly context dependant, with contexts being in relation to both the game context and the identity constructions of the player (Shaw, 2011).

There are many more aspects to play with identities and/or identity play within games, some of which I will address in later segments. An important note is, that roleplay is something different from identity play. As Williams et al. define from a sociological perspective on role-playing games, identity in role-playing games is something the player attaches to, whereas the role expresses the expected behaviour of the player and other agents in the game based on these constructed identities (Williams *et al.*, 2018). The enactment of a role does not exclude learning processes towards identity development in play, but the two terms should be kept separate in the analysis of pedagogical means of transformational learning. Namely because the role, be it imagined by the player or presented by the game (or mixes thereof), constitutes a layer of the interactions towards expectations of the gameworld, rather than the processes of learning through the interaction itself.

In summary, the gamer identity is not the focal point for identity formation in relation to games, but rather the processes that emerge in gameplay that could lead toward any type of identity formation are. The play-practise with single-player games is comprised of sessions that are free from immediate sociocultural regulation, meaning that the solitary player can potentially enter into all aspects of play as appropriative, subversive, destructive, and more (see for example Sicart (2014)) without any immediate relational repercussions. The contextual nature of the interaction between the player and the game is however important, as the game design itself cannot explain the complexities of play with identities. And finally, the notion of role in role-playing refers to enactment of identity, rather than identity formation in itself.

3. Identity, self, and digital games

The concept of identity and identity development is difficult to define within this limited space of text. What I will try to do here is an attempt at separating identity and the concept of the “self”, as these two theoretical constructs are closely connected, but potentially also separate towards the practise of play. I focus mostly on the concepts of self and identity within the constructivist and sociocultural paradigms, as these interlink with the notion of transformational learning.

James Paul Gee (2000) highlight how the notion of identity is an intersubjective phenomenon that is closely linked to both the individual’s self-conceptualisation and the sociocultural discourse that define importance of certain identity structures. For now, this establishes that identities are numerous and contextualised constructions that are not stagnant, and which are subject to development throughout the entirety of a person’s life. This continual process involves identity exploration (active questioning of what and who am I) and verification (active intersubjective presentation and evaluation) followed by commitment (Shamoa-Nir (2017) primarily based on Marcia (1980)). What this implies is the active social practise of self-representation, followed by self-reflective processes in which the importance of both social and cultural structures cohere with the individual’s self-image. This raises the question of what then might happen, when we remove the notion of intersubjective (human to human) processes in favour of the solitary play-practise with a digital game? Indeed, to what extent the digital artefact can act as a separate subjective instance that allows for self-reflection towards any number of potential identity structures (ideological, political, sexual, and more)?

This is where the notion of the “self” as a separate (albeit closely linked) construct of identity formation and identity play may help to define the potential processes of development. Although the stable point of identity and the self from a theoretical point of view is that it is a somewhat unified relational phenomena, secluding the two concepts lets us redefine the interactive quality of them. As Baumeister and Finkel state about the “self”: “It keeps track of information about itself, works to improve how it is regarded by others, identifies itself with important relationships and roles, and makes choices (most of which are social).” (Baumeister and Finkel, 2010, p. 140). The self is seen here as self-referential, meaning that it can act and develop as a single subjective instance in which negotiation and evaluation can occur. Splitting the self and identity in a theoretical sense

would then mean, that identity is the relationally constructed entity of a person, whereas the self may be considered the construction of identity that is unbound by social activity. The self, in other words, meaning - what we are- when we are only ourselves, and the complex processes that this may entail. This does not mean that the self is not co-constructed in a relational manner through time and contexts, but instead that it is not directly dependent on intersubjective commitments in the reflective processes of self-development.

With this somewhat conceptual dualism of identity and self resting on the processes in which they are defined and developed, it may then be possible to distinguish which of the two processes are prevalent in the play-practise with digital games. Indeed, maybe the possibility of defining how the game may instigate learning processes of a transformational nature towards any of the two, or both.

Looking at literature pertaining to digital games and identity, this distinction may aid in the further understanding of the processes that are involved with identity play and play with the self. Jos de Mul (2014) describes the term of Ludic Identity by breaking it into three structures. As he explains, the player may use a game as a means of reflection in the combination of the ludic narrative and the possibility of the player to make choices through the design of the game systems or mechanics. The identity structures in this process are that of logical-, anthropological- and reflective identity. These terms represent differing aspects of identity and through these, identity development. According to de Mul, the logical identity is "the self" being self-referential as the individual perceives both body and mind as unique to his/her own being. The anthropological identity comprises both the spatial and temporal nature of identity, meaning a non-dualistic perception of physical and psychological coherence and recognition of continuing development processes. The reflective identity seeks towards integration of the previous two terms (logical and anthropological) in coherence to the sociocultural context. Cultural and sociological identities then form as a natural result of the processes of the contextualised reflective identity, being self-awareness, self-reflection and holding a self-image (de Mul, 2014).

In this perspective, identity development rests on the individual's ability to activate the reflective identity towards the contextual frame of the game along with the individual's sociocultural frame as reference in terms of their own ludically created identity construction. The self in this context, being the logical and anthropological aspects of this. This means, that in the identity construction, the self would be considered an inevitable predisposition in any form of identity play with the digital game. This falls in line with the previously mentioned findings from Adrienne Shaw (2011, 2012), in that the design of the game is not constitutional to identification nor identity play, but rather dependant on the player's individual predispositions as a positioned sociocultural entity to engage with representations of identity.

In her doctoral thesis, Kelly Boudreau (2012) summarises some of the common factors from sociology, social psychology, and "videogame" theories of the self. Namely, that identity construction requires some degree of reflective internalisation by the individual based on external factors, and that this identity then needs projection though external means in the physical world or through digitally mediated interactions. With this point of

departure, Boudreau defines the term hybrid identity as something other than the in-game identity and the player's identity, meaning a third identity of sorts, that develops in the interaction. These "digitally mediated interactions" are interesting, as they stand for the development and production of the self-reflective process in which identity structures and emotions towards the sociocultural contextual frame are evaluated.

What is visible from these vantages is that both the theoretical and empirical basis of identity development in gameplay is indeed present. However, also that the specific processes pertaining to the movement of attitudes and assumptions in a critical perspective towards transformation are difficult to define. As Boudreau (2012) states, the hybrid identity does not necessarily emerge, as it is dependent on a variety of factors in the game's delivery of agency, narrative, and representations. Equally important, the player's relationship with the playable figure (character, figure, or avatar) and the positioning of this in the gameworld. From this, the notion of the game as a pedagogical agent towards identity development would rest on a variety of factors. In the interaction, what does the game offer the player to play with in terms of identity, role, and self? How can a game achieve processes towards either of these structures? If the game stands as both platform, interaction, and basis of critical reflection in the developmental processes, what is their efficacy towards this? Rather, why would they instigate these processes, and how can these be deemed pedagogically sound towards personal development?

4. Single-player games as pedagogical agents

In their essence, games are hegemonical in nature by presenting the most basic of interaction as necessities in the interaction. Press X or spacebar to jump etc. And these are of course learning processes, regardless of the predispositions the player may have in terms of game and controller literacy (keyboard, mouse, or controller). Likewise, it is seductive to think, that what is seen at face value (such as violence, killing or other forms of indecent behaviour) is the hegemonical truth of the potential learning experience. But aside from the hegemony of the physical interaction, this seems unlikely in terms of identity. Agreeably, the notion of being "good" at a game may constitute the affective result of a "gamer" identity as discussed earlier, but it does not constitute the reflective processes needed for identity formation. Pressing X at the right time continuously does not a full identity make. But the subject may experience affective reactions in terms of accomplishment that may lead to an intersubjective identity, if mobilised in an inter-relational context. This is somewhat counterintuitive, as mastering a game could constitute all the requirements of the ludic identity as logical, anthropological, and reflective identity, but will still fall into the realm of the "gamer" identity. This means it is an indicator of sociocultural identification, rather than an actual development of the individual's perception and use of the self in a processual manner. We are then within the realm of results rather than the processes themselves.

This leads to the reference to transformational learning, where critical dialectical discourse as "critically self-reflective" processes means that the player, if on the terms of identity play, needs to be in a dialogical relationship with the game. In this relationship, the sociocultural frames of the player would need to be put into question, or at least be referential to the play-experience. This leads to the assumption, that the gameworld and

the player's lifeworld needs to be coherent. But perhaps it is not quite so, as the reciprocal relationship in play with the game quite simply needs to cohere with a sense of reality that the player experiences. Alexander Galloway (2004) explains this as the "congruence requirement", which in simple terms means that the fidelity of the game is not based on exact coherence, but that of the experience of coherence. In this sense, the game, regardless of the presentation, need only afford the correct context of challenge towards the identity or self in order to constitute a valid environment of transformational learning. As such, the game as a meaningful dialogical agent is the state in which the player sees possible identities, rather than the singular intended identity.

And this is where many games may fall short, as Boudreau (2012) also finds, as the player-game relation is based on more than the immediately present narrative and gameplay. As such, it is not possible from the immediate and face-value presentation of the game itself to distinguish if it constitutes a dialogical environment for identity play or play with the self. Rather, the dialogical possibility and probability of any given game is based on not only the game's presentation of possibilities of action, but also the individual's willingness to engage in this particular form of learning based on the recognition of sociocultural structures of relevance. If this is not the case, it is perhaps more akin to a game which poses challenges and/or difficulties, which are to be overcome by the prowess of knowledge, skill, and competencies within the mechanical sphere of the game, rather than dialogical processes.

Yet, as the "critical judgement" relates to the self and the ethical standpoints and evaluation of the agency the player may be offered in an assessment of assumptions, beliefs and more. Ethical thinking seen here as a process of evaluating the enactment of morals (Sicart, 2009). In a game that proposes challenges in this direction, this does not entail doing what is ethically most "right" in the coherence between gameworld and lifeworld of the player. Instead, the processes of ethical thinking in themselves become the transformative aspect. Yes, the ethical disposition needs to be present in both game and individual, but it also needs to be in a context of agency towards perceived importance. Upon the exertion of agency, the game will then respond to this from its own logics, which is another important point. The logics of the gameworld constitute an ongoing decoding process, in which the player needs to assess and position themselves continuously. As often the case with game design and representations, it stands as a reflection of temporary sociocultural discourses, rather than the potential challenges or interests of the contemporary individual. What this means is that the contemporary sociocultural frame is a deciding factor in game design, but not necessarily in the processual and contextually dependant decoding process of the contemporal and contextually situated player. The player's point of reference is thereby never decidable, as the artifact regardless of its production is at all times subject to the decoding processes of the player's sociocultural context. Game design then being devoid of temporal contexts, but not of contemporal contexts at the discretion of the individual player, rather than the societal discourse at any give time. The critical judgment therefore rests on the player's possibility space of ethical thinking, meaning that no matter the subjective positioning of the player in relation to the game, there should be an assessment of the self in perceived ethical dilemmas.

5. In closing

Schrader and McCreery (2012) approach the assessment of learning in games (no to be confused with assessment in transformational learning) by distinguishing the what, how, and under what conditions learning should take place. From this, measurement and context must be taken into account in order to make valid claims of a game's learning potential. These notions of the predisposing factors of assessing learning are of importance. But so also are the many levels on which these notions may be based when it comes to identity. One is the realisation, that these developments take time and are not realisable in a single situation. Second, is that however much the evaluation may result in significant or insignificant changes, the result will always be that of a contextual experience for each individual. As such, the investigative endeavour of a game as a basis of identity play will always be dependent on the individual's departure for identity development, and the individual's sense of self. Meaning the logical identity's readiness for change in an anthropological view, towards the processes of reflective identity development in relation to the gameworld. And this becomes an interesting notion, as the learner as subject, in the situation of solitary play, may de-subjectivise themselves in taking on identities and roles which challenge the self, rather than a logical identification at hand. Thereby, the player may actively instigate processes within the sphere of the reflective judgement, meaning changes in attitudes, beliefs, lifeworld views and inter-relational possibility spaces, which are not easily measurable.

In researching identity development and single-player games as a solitary play-practise, the focus should be on the individual and "instanced" processes and these processes in a continuum in order to define what and how identity and the self are intertwined with the play-practise of playing single-player games. Establishing the meaning of the processes from a basis of learning theory and pedagogical relation means that we may be able to decipher whether these processes lead to actual changes. These potential changes would seem to focus on the individual's possibility space of mobilising identity structures in both social and non-social settings or may simply be a strengthening of the individual's already established identity structures and sense of self. While translating these notions into specific games has been left at the reader's discretion, this paper has hopefully described that investigating identity formation, yet alone designing games towards it, is a difficult and complex endeavour. One that is not only mired by the complexity of games and our existing knowledge of them (of which I have only presented little), but also the complexity of identity and the many facets of it. In the end, more questions are raised than answered towards the play-practise and the potential for identity formation. However, the hope is that this may pose a view in which these questions may aid in research of complex practises and complex processes of learning and development, in and with single-player games.

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