Playful Experiences with Games: Empirical Findings from the Playful Life Project

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Playfulness has often been described as a universal human experience (Pellis & Pellis 2013). Interventions targeting playfulness have been shown to improve mental health in adults (Proyer et al. 2021) and has been shown to be a key characteristic in online purchasing behavior (Byun et al. 2017). Despite the widespread interest in playfulness, several unresolved foundational questions remain (Masek & Stenros 2021). One set of questions revolves around whether the experience of gaming is like that of play, or how they are connected to playfulness (see Stenros 2015). The study of playful experience and its connection to games has also been criticized for a western cultural bias demonstrating a lack of data on how other cultural backgrounds may view games, play or playfulness (e.g. Shen, Liu, & Song 2021). Empirical research on player experiences has yet to adequately investigate whether players in diverse communities experience games as playful or how. This question is at the center of game studies and its answer will enable a deeper understanding of the diversity of player experiences.

The *Playful Life Project* offers an empirical phenomenological analysis of 114 playful experiences gathered from 75 english-speaking participants from six different continents and 40 different nationalities. These 114 experiences are of a specific memory that individuals would self-label as one of their most "playful" experiences. No examples for playfulness were provided and rather the individuals personal interpretation of "the internal experience often associated with play, where you can be doing any type of activity" was elicited. This interview data is ideal for investigating if and how games are naturally connected to playful experience by a large multi-cultural group.

These experiences cover a wide range of activities and contexts. Games and digital games are highly represented as playful in the data. Of the 114 experiences, 52 (46%) pertained to playing a self-identified "game". Specifically, playing a digital game was one of the most common types of activities described ($n = 13$, 11.5%). Playful gaming was widely represented across culture, with memories of playful games coming from all six continents, and 29 of the 40 represented nationalities. Digital games were more

culturally narrow in their representation with all stories of playful digital games coming from European and Asian backgrounds. Games were generally described as an essential part of the playfulness of these experiences, however, all of the interviews described other reasons as well for why their experience was playful. In addition to the game itself, a playful experience with a game, both digital and non-digital, is most notably connected to two other criteria

> 1.Playful Relationships: Playing a game with a friend or otherwise playfully engaging person.

> 2.Playful Motivation: A deep commitment to playing the game that is independent from the outcome of the game.

Unpacking these two criteria offers valuable reinforcement and criticism of previous theories of games and playfulness. Digital games were commonly presented as spaces where established playful relationships could gather and play and, in that way, represented a sociological third place (Oldenburg & Brissett 1982). Playful motivation was described by players as seeking a particular outcome while being notably indifferent as to whether they actually achieved it. This finding supports claims of playfulness as autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi 2000), paratelic (Apter 1991), and intrinsically motivated. Finally, the prevalence of playful experiences in game playing indicates a strong connection between playfulness and games, a notion that challenges theoretical dichotomies of playfulness and gamefulness (e.g. Deterding et al. 2011).

This empirical work is ongoing and hopes to provide crucial data to further discourses on playfulness and games. Further research should be conducted upon the cultural differences of gaming and playfulness as well as how games are affected by other playful contexts such as interpersonal relationships between players.

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