Navigating the 'Gamer Space'

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This extended abstract outlines the theoretical and methodological considerations that prompted the development of an in-game digital walking interview methodology for use in my PhD project. Using theory concerning identity and intersecting trajectories (Massey, 2005), language (Bourdieu, 1991), interaction (Blumer, 1998), and power (Foucault, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991), I establish a theoretical framework that spatializes the in-game social experience and amounts to the conceptualization of what is defined as the 'Gamer Space' within this research. Existing literature on walking methodologies, social media and digital 'go-along' methods, and interactive elicitation are built upon to develop the approach of 'digital in-game walking interviews', an embodied, digital interpretation of traditional walking interviews and online 'go-along' methodologies translated into the online social video game environment upon which the 'Gamer Space' is situated. An embodied walking methodology prompts us to consider the spatialised experience of existing in online social videogame spaces, how these spaces are navigated, and how players understand and relate to the game spaces they find themselves. Preliminary findings present the Gamer Space as one concerned with expectation, change, and renegotiation.

The 'Gamer Space'

My PhD project spatialises and outlines the online social videogame experience, paying attention to the constructed identities and cultures that are interacted with from within, defining this as the 'Gamer Space'. The 'Gamer Space' is defined within this research with an emphasis on the 'gamer' rather than the 'player', because it has

been demonstrated that 'gamer' is an identity characteristic rooted in commitment (Grooten and Kowert, 2015). Identity is fundamental to the definition of the Gamer Space, particularly as personal meaning is demonstrated as a core element of the Gamer Space and the way that gamers perceive and approach their game play activities (Veal et al, 2024). 'Meaning' here refers to the sentimentality and functionality ascribed to a place rather than simply the way something is understood or interpreted. The meanings ascribed to games and gameplay by gamers therefore determines the way that players engage with them (Veal et al, 2024), and it is these meaningful approaches to gaming which aid in the construction of the Gamer Space.

In acknowledging the spatiality of this environment, I identify its socio-spatial construction, pinpoint the forces that shape it and the way that different groups experience it. To do this, I outline a framework for understanding what amounts to this spatial experience.

Theoretical Framework

My PhD project establishes online social videogame experiences as occurring within the shared social context of the 'Gamer Space. In doing so, I present a theoretical framework that highlights the influence of identity, language and power on the formation of the Gamer Space, allowing for an awareness of experiences associated with power and domination as well as inequality and inaccessibility.

Massey (2005) suggests that we should think of spaces as universes of cultures and meetings up of identities and histories. Social gaming spaces illustrate this plane of social interaction, where gaming communities, networks and their cultures are developed and perpetuated. Blumer's (1998) symbolic interactionist framework offers a lens with which we can view the ways that meanings are developed and maintained through these interactions. Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad offers the opportunity to identify the Gamer Space in terms of it's production, experience, and perception. In considering what drives acceptance or exclusion from this social space, Bourdieu (1991) offers the opportunity to observe a culture of communication that unifies but also separates through language and communication, allowing for distinctions between groups, and the space itself, to be established.

Developing an In-Game 'Walking' Methodology

My initial ethnographic approach proved insufficient, leading me to adopt a new method. To do so, I drew on my theoretical framework and existing interactive and digital 'go-along' methodologies including Jørgensen's (2016) social media 'go-along' approach, Light, Burgess and Duguay's (2018) app interface researcher analysis, in-game go-along interviews used for game preservation and archiving (Smith Nicholls and Cook, 2024) and Spokes and Denham's (2019) 'interactive elicitation'. Drawing on these approaches, I contribute a gamer-centred approach to the in-game 'go-along' interview, developing a more embodied sense of 'walking' through the game space, whereby the presence within and moving through the map is central to the data collected. 'Walking' rather than 'going along' demonstrated the embodied sense of actively moving oneself, through the medium of the videogame character (Gee, 2008), rather than simply 'showing' or 'telling', and demonstrates the importance of the

journey. This encapsulates the sense of embodiment, presence and navigation integral to the Gamer Space.

19 participants (M=12, F=4, NB=2, GF=1) were invited to discuss their game identity, avatars, favourite places, personalised places, spaces of socialisation, and functional spaces. As a result, the data collected accessed information on a vast range of aspects my initial ethnographic approach could not. This included first-hand gamer-led knowledge about game play, mechanics, story lines and features; exposure to add-ons, customisation and mods that alter the approach to game play; and the ability to see through my participant's screen, their eyes, allow me to draw on my own reflexive interpretations and responses to the things encountered on the journey.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings demonstrate that the Gamer Space is navigated by an active process of expectation, change, and renegotiation. Many participants considered the social gaming environments they interact in as a space that once was once personal and positively social. But over time changes such as less requirement for social connection has led to online gaming spaces feeling more distant and unstable. Once-social gamers now approach their game play in terms of individual needs, and confine their sociality to out-of-game platforms. Gamers carry expectations into their new gaming approaches, shaping how they interact with others, perpetuating expectations of hostility. The result is a more disconnected and disembodied approach to social game play – an integral understanding for the field of Game Studies in considering future approaches to studying the sociality of online videogames.

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