

# Gameplay-Elicited Interviews: Exploring Worldness and the Processes of Play

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This abstract presents the potential of using players' own gameplay videos in video-elicited interviews to facilitate phenomenological research into play practices. Based on 14 video-elicited interviews, I discuss how video-elicitation (see Henry & Fetters, 2012; Nielsen & Christiansen, 2000) can provide researchers access to rich and detailed descriptions of playful experiences. Although with an implicit significant time investment, this affords a unique opportunity to investigate the sense of *Worldness* that players experience through actual and individual processes of play.

Emotional activation is a crucial part of the sense of worldness in the playful engagement with digital games, but it is also challenging to gain access to such phenomena (Lankoski, 2012; Mortensen, 2018). I argue for microethnographic research methods (see Baker et al., 2008; Giddings, 2009), making use of players' own gameplay videos and video-elicited interviews to explore phenomena of play with digital games.

As Lisbeth Klastrop and Susana Tosca state, the sense of worldness is the ability and willingness to engage with a fictional world on deeper levels of emotion, in which there is an internalisation of the fiction as well as ascription of a value (Klastrop, 2008; Klastrop & Tosca, 2004; Tosca & Klastrop, 2019). Worldness is then the combination of a player's experience of the story-world, the aesthetics of play within this world, its presented ethics and morality, and the characters that are central to this world (ibid.). Exploring the valuation and internalisation processes of such complex individual understandings from a qualitative perspective requires novel research methods, especially in the light of changing discourses, ideological perceptions, and game developments alike.

The research experiences presented here are based on 14 video-elicited interviews across 13 individuals (age 22-34, average age 25, five women and eight men). The participants delivered on average 14 hours of gameplay video over the course of 3-7 weeks. To keep the video data gathering as unobtrusive as possible (see Bernard, 2006) only gameplay was recorded, and no facial or vocal expressions from participants were collected. Participants themselves chose which game(s) to play, either a new game they wanted to play or games that they were already playing.

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Across the 13 participants, nine different games were played, ranging from traditional role-playing games to action RPGs and “strategic games”: *Baldur’s Gate* (Overhaul Games, 2012), *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009), *Divinity: Original Sin* (Larian Studios, 2014), *PlaneScape: Torment* (Beamdog, 2017), and *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and the more varied categories: (*Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017), *StarCraft 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), *Disney Dreamlight Valley* (Gameloft Montreal, 2023), and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare, 2011))

The video analysis focused on identifying situations that were indicative of processes of valuation and evaluation. An in-depth description of identification criteria is unfortunately beyond scope, but this analysis yielded a total of 220 relevant situations with the potential to expose deeper levels of emotional processing. Five to nine video segments were then used in each individual video-elicited interview, allowing a phenomenological exploration of situations in which it was relatively clear that the player was processing their available choices and actions. Participants provided rich descriptions detailing processes of internalising a sense of worldness.

The longest interval between an actual play situation and the video-elicited interview was 7 weeks. The participant, Dan, playing *Dragon Age: Origins*, remembered the situation “quite well” and expressed detailed accounts of his experience of game events before, within, and after the 2-minute video sequence. Another participant, Paul, gave a detailed account of his situated confusion (3 weeks prior) about the class system in *PlaneScape: Torment*, based on a 1.5-second movement of his cursor within the character sheet in the game.

Playing *Disney Dreamlight Valley*, Tory was visibly considering being rude to Donald Duck, but chose otherwise, stating: “Sometimes I consider these slightly mean comments, but then I feel like ‘no, I wouldn’t say that’ and then I choose the other one”. As I asked Tory about what that meant, she elaborated that she had surrendered herself to a feeling from her childhood dreams of being a princess and that the avatar was, at this point, a representation of her and the feelings that she allowed herself to have within this gameworld. Though this situation had occurred several weeks before the interview, it provided intricate details about the playfulness Tory experienced within the gameworld, and how it connected to her childhood memories in juxtaposition to her adult life.

Exemplified here is that the inter-relational experiences of play within this configuration are made explicit in video-elicitation, as video recordings allow for exploration of the interdependencies and affordances within the play activity itself. As Seth Giddings (2009) argues, applying microethnographic methods to gameplay enables researchers to identify and explore the “collusion of agents” within the playful activity. This underlines that the microethnographic approach (see Baker et al., 2008; Streeck & Mehus, 2004) has strengths in allowing for the exploration of experiential components of playful experiences based on the visual nature of digital games. In resonance, Pink et al. describe how varying forms of digital ethnography allow researchers to ask questions about how it is to ‘be’ within a world of digital configurations (Pink et al., 2016). As exemplified above, Gameplay-elicited interviews allow the oscillation between the factual expression of video and the internal reasoning within the player through memory activation and subjective experience. In this, the individual video segments give access to how the sense of worldness and the immediacy of actions shape playful experiences. In this space lie possibilities of

exploring complex processes of evaluation, and through these, how play and internalisation are interconnected as mutually dependent processes. Gameplay-elicited interviews allow both the researcher and the participant access to internalisation processes of Worldness within gameplay, based on factual sequences of events as experienced subjectively and emotionally by the individual player. This specific interview method has the potential to reveal such structures of complex processes of play with digital games, which would otherwise likely remain hidden.

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