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# 31. "YOU CAN'T HELP SHOUTING AND YELLING": FUN AND SOCIAL INTERACTION IN SUPER MONKEY BALL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relation between social interaction and fun in multi-player console gaming contexts. It points to the fruitfulness of integrating game studies and game sociology with cultural studies of television and video use in order to explain both the framing and (social) use of console games and the fun of playing them. A pre-study of the relation between social interaction and fun in the playing of the game Super Monkey Ball reveals that there is a close relation between gaming skills, the gaming situation as a pleasurable and relieving social activity and the experience of fun.

## KEYWORDS

Social interaction, fun, console gaming, Super Monkey Ball, social practice, contexts of consumption

## INTRODUCTION

"Super Monkey Ball is just such a fun game to play", an otherwise non-gaming colleague once told me and his comment is what motivated the research described in this paper. It grew out of two informal observations: firstly, several people that I have met (colleagues and friends) enjoy playing *Super Monkey Ball* (SMB) though they do not normally play computer or videogames. This made me wonder, which features of this console game - or the console gaming situation - causes this unusual engagement in an activity they do not normally engage in? Secondly, being a SMB player myself which very much enjoys to play this game with other people, it appeared to me one day while playing that the cosy social intimacy of the console gaming situation in some respects resembles the experience of the video or TV viewing context and particularly because of this "feature" encourages other forms of social interaction than PC game playing.

### **The console game as living room activity**

Watching TV or videos normally takes place in the living room or other social spaces; and likewise much console-playing differs significantly from the isolated PC-playing experience, which normally takes place close to the screen and in a private space, such as one's room (or office).<sup>1</sup> Console playing normally takes place somewhat removed from the screen on which the game is played, and, if more than one player is involved, often physically close to others as to enable all players to watch the screen (in contrast, even in the case of multi-player PC games, each player is placed in front of their own screen and at

<sup>1</sup> An American survey from 2001 shows that 38% of the consoles are placed in the living room and 21% of the consoles in the family room. In other numbers: 3 out of 5 consoles are placed in a space meant for socialising.  
<http://www.theesa.com/consumer-survey2001.html>

some physical distance from other players). Thus, at least the physical context of playing a console game like SMB, , logically resembles that of the video- or TV viewing as it involves the use of a TV in a domestic setting. Hence, we are looking at a popular activity where people often come together to socially engage in a leisure activity in an intimate setting. But exactly what kind of social interaction does console gaming involving several players encourage? And is the living room "intimacy" and social set-up of the console game experience part of what makes a console game like SMB attractive to the inexperienced gamers? Finally, when trying to answer these questions through empirical studies, can consulting some of the studies done on the TV- and video audiences help provide a methodological framework and research design for studying the social practice of playing console games?<sup>2</sup>

#### GAMES, FUN AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

As Fine has pointed out [4],[5], multi-player gaming is one amongst a number of *voluntary* social activities, a "focused sociability" [5, p.8], which provisions its participants with certain resources (mainly equipment, space, and companionship). In the case of console gaming, the provisions are the game console itself, the room where the console is situated (often a player's living room), and other players to play with. The purpose of leisure activities is "the provisioning of satisfaction, fun" [5, p. 3]. In particular, the focused sociability of gaming basically takes its point of departure in a common agreement on the rules of

the games played. As such, gaming is a highly codified form of social interaction and, in the case of multi-player gaming, the possibility of fun is thus, as Fine emphasises, a *social* not a psychological result of the game interaction. The experience of fun very much depends on the group's implicit or explicit adherence to the rules of the game in question.

#### Games as social safe houses

But what generally makes a game fun? Game sociologist Roger Callois, in continuation of Johan Huizinga's work, tells us that gaming is as an activity which is distinguished from everyday life in several aspects: it is an activity which is free, separate, uncertain and unproductive; unlike real life activities, playing a game does not generate any material value or wealth and is not governed by the entropy of material reality (all can be restored). Most importantly, Callois states that games are "free unreality": to play (a game) is to suspend oneself from reality, and to place oneself within a "delimitation of space and time" and in that sense, one can argue that gaming is not that different from the act of make-believe we engage in when we have to do with a piece of representational art such as a novel or painting that tries to draw us into another world. Engagement in a game partly comes about through the act of "creating belief" in the world system it imposes on us and by interpreting game world events on the basis of what the game in question has presented to us as its laws and internal logic. Accordingly, in this specific form of escape from everyday reality, it is our grad-

<sup>2</sup> I have, for this pilot study, restricted myself to a restricted and more well-known body of literature on television, video games and popular culture by Jerslev [9], Grossberg [8], Morley [13], Buckingham [2] and Lull [12]. This selection of literature is only suggestive of the number of studies within this field.

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ual mastering of the specific rules of a game world, and thereby 'the world' itself, which provides the experience of fun; thus I would argue that, on a structural level, fun resides in the oscillation between continuously enjoying being faced with the new challenges the game offers and experiencing a successful progress through the game by our mastering of the rules through our skills and actions.

### **Games and reality**

However, in understanding "fun", we must also understand the relation between games and reality. Caillois argued that although games are not a derivation of "serious" culture (war, rites and so forth), they do exist on parallel lines to this, in a safe space in which you can play out impulses and attitudes which you are also influenced by in everyday life, but without the consequences which they would have in this life. Herein lies the cultural fertility and the sociological interest of games: they reveal the "character, pattern and values of every society", repeated and negotiated in a safe playground, a special social setting. The second-order reality nature of the game or pretense-play (in Bateson's example, the playful bite refers to a bite which has and will never take place) makes possible a full-scale enactment of that which you might never dare if this was for "real".

The resemblance between the process of therapy and the phenomenon of play is, in fact, profound. Both occur within a delimited psychological frame, a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages. *In both play and therapy, the messages have a special and peculiar relationship to a more concrete or basic reality. Just as the pseudocombat of play is not real combat, so also the pseudolove and pseudohate of therapy are not real love and hate. The "transfer" is discriminated from real love and real hate by signals invoking the psychological frame; and indeed it is*

*this frame which permits the transfer to reach its full intensity and to be discussed between patient and therapist. [1, p. 191, my emphasis]*

As Goffman says "An encounter provides a world for its participants, but the character and stability of this world is intimately related to its selective relationship to the wider one" [7, p. 71] - i.e. that which one recognises as debatable within the given encounter and that which "we do not talk about". Games are specially successful or "fun" activities exactly because following their rules makes it easy for us to know what is relevant and irrelevant; we can be engulfed by the immediate reality they present to us without having interpretational problems or having to constantly shift between different modes of social behaviour:

To be at ease in a situation is to be properly subject to these rules, entranced by the meanings they generate and stabilize; to be ill at ease means that one is ungrasped by immediate reality and that one loosens that grasp that others have of it. [7, pp. 72]

"Gaming" or playing is thus a form of activity, which creates a successful setting for interaction, social as well as manipulative (controlling and mastering the characters in the game, mastering the social game of playing without committing any blunders). Adhering to the rules for interaction laid down by the game system (or, alternatively, communally try to disobey them by exchanging "cheats" and short-cuts), there is no doubt as to the relation between the given world (focused gathering) and us. Clear-cut and unbendable rules make it easy to adjust and perform with failure. Because gaming is just "play", you have the pleasure of competing with others in a way that is not physically dangerous, nor has any serious consequences for your everyday social relations. Even if

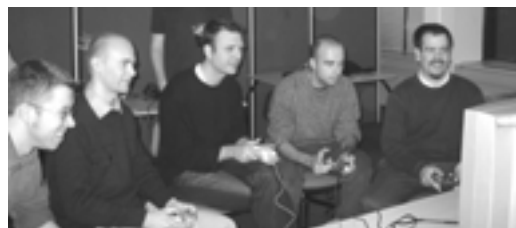
the event of “winning” is something which has significance also outside the game - such as when a player turns to the other player and says “Ha, ha I won over you” (the “you” s/he addresses here is clearly the player herself, not the character in the game), this “real” victory has no social significance outside the gaming situation (professional gaming where you win cash prizes might be an exception), and it remains socially safe to verbalise and brag over your victory.<sup>3</sup>

**RESEARCHING SOCIAL INTERACTION:  
GAMING AS AN AFFECTIVE ALLIANCE**

If the sociologists can help explain the attractiveness of games as a ‘fun’ form of social interaction, can cultural studies tell us more about the attractiveness of games as a specific type of cultural activity? Can viewing games as a popular culture activity, like watching soaps or listening to pop & rock music, tell us more about why it is fun activity and how we should study it as such? The sensibility of popular culture is that of multiplicity of affective investments in activities which “provide a certain measure of enjoyment and pleasure” [8, p. 74] or as Jerslev summarises Grossberg, “a number of contextually defined stagings and experiences of ‘having fun’” [9, p. 33]. *Affective alliances* are the concrete manifestations of popular culture formations, they are groups of people who come together around activities which are limited in time and has as a primary goal of achieving affect on a very basic level, effecting both body and emotion (for instance rock fans listening and dancing

to rock music). In an elaboration of this notion of sensibility, Jerslev convincingly argues, that this sensibility does not decide the choice of certain “texts” and genres, but comes about *through* the choice of which texts to engage with. An alliance is made in the moment of choosing what is the common interest a group will take shape around. Taking the concept even further, it seems obvious to also describe gaming as an affective alliance which does in fact *directly* affect the body (in the case of console games through the use of haptics, and by inducing feelings of vertigo and spatial confusion through the presentation of the game environment) and your emotional state (excitement when you win, anger when you loose).<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that social interaction in the game situation sometimes explicitly evolves around the verbalisation of the bodily reactions the players experience, as when one of our test players loudly exclaimed to the other players during the first stages of playing SMB: “It’s like riding a bike when you are drunk!”

Even watching other playing SMB can be fun  
**Studying game alliances**



<sup>3</sup> For a further elaboration of games as only “half-fiction” see Juul, 1999, 2003

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But how do we as researchers study these affective alliances? In the 1990's, Media Studies have experienced an ethnographic turn, a shift of focus from studying the effect of the reception to the process of reception; observing not what the media does to us but what "minds do with the media" [13, p. 9] and the "how" of the activity itself. Studies of effect and use are now also conducted in specific "*micro-contexts of consumption*", for instance by studying the ways a particular family watches TV and how the TV, in return, structures family life [12], [13] or how a group of girls interact during the viewing of a horror video movie [9]. Studies like those mentioned above reveal that an activity, like watching video, is just but a part of this focused social experience; for instance when young people come together to watch video, this activity also creates a space in which discussion of difficult or proscribed subjects is possible [9]. Understanding the "power of the media" must include studying the relationship between the "text" and the active audience; studying not only observable social interaction but how the dynamics of viewing (the choice of programme types, family positions in the living room, cultural background of the viewers) in this particular social practice unfolds, will provide us with a opportunity to study the influence of for instance family power relations, gender and cultural background on both reception and social interaction around the activity. Likewise, actual experience tells us that likewise gaming can just be an excuse for "hanging out", giving people (friends, colleagues) the opportunity to compete and mock each other in a context, where you can safely display feelings such as anger, annoyance, revengefulness and scorn without any repercussions because the "metaframe" of this mode of communication is that is "just for fun". In the case at hand, this means studying not how SMB is played but the process and activity of playing itself, observing the participants in a realistic playing context, as close to the domestic setting, in which playing

normally takes place, as possible.

### **SMB AS A FUN GAME: TESTING THE ACTIVITY OF PLAYING SMB**

To examine some of the issues presented above, I decided to do a pilot study of the relation between social interaction, gameplay and the experience of fun when playing SMB in a group, in collaboration with some of my colleagues which were also eager to study how people engaged with SMB in practice, albeit for other reasons. I was curious to examine whether the experience of fun would be different, depending on whether you were an inexperienced player or not. It was my initial hypothesis that SMB is a game that is so easy to master that even inexperienced players are soon able to compete against other players with a fair chance of success; this would explain why even non-gamers find this game 'fun'. The game, which is in itself rather "childish" (see also Tosca elsewhere in this paper for an elaboration of this), affords and creates a situation where childish behaviour, such as shouting at and teasing other players is allowed, therefore I particularly wanted to observe adults playing to see if they would "fall into" this behaviour, even if they did not know each other in advance.

### **Research design**

For our study (for further descriptions, see also Tosca and Egenfeldt-Nielsen elsewhere in this collection), we decided to invite two groups of players to a SMB game session: a group consisting of inexperienced or very casual games and another group consisting of experienced, "hard-core" gamers. All players were students, either at the IT University or the University of Copenhagen. They were all between 20 and 30 years old. The collected group consisted of two young women, who were both inexperienced players and seven men. At the game session, I gave them two questionnaires with questions related to

their gaming experiences, one before and one after the actual game test, and supported the questionnaires with participant observation which consisted mainly of note taking and photos. Apart from mapping the players experience with playing, the intention of the questionnaires was to make the players verbalise what they think is the "fun" part of playing and to examine whether they, after actually having played SMB, thought of this particular game as a fun game and why. This was done by giving them both multiple choice answers and open space questions. To encourage and enable the feeling of the intimacy of the living room, the test took place in a graduate students office, filled with shelves and books, posters and personal items of the students, and several games and consoles. This was as close to a "homely" setting we could get at the university.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

### *Gaming experience*

The five inexperienced players all confirmed on the questionnaire that they rarely played games max 5-6 times year), whereas the four experienced players all stated that they played several times a month. No members or either group had tried to play SMB before. When the inexperienced players played, four out of five did is as part of as social activity, but to this question (which provided them with the possibility of more than one answer), several of the inexperienced players also answered that they occasionally played games "because they are easy to play". Equally, judging from the free answers to what made

a game fun in their opinion, a 'fun' game to this type of players is a game, which is primarily easy to learn and to play.

### *The experience of SMB*

After the game session, the players on the questionnaire was asked if they would play SMB again; if they found the game easy to learn; what part of the game they preferred, and if they would like to play SMB with others or alone or both in the future. Finally, as an open question, I asked them that if they found the game fun, what aspects of it in particular did they find funny?

### *- Inexperienced players and SMB*

Of the options offered on a scale measuring the learning curve of the game, in the group of inexperienced players, one found it "very easy" to learn to play, two "easy but took a bit time to learn" and two found it "a bit difficult". The girls both stated that they did not feel like playing SMB again, and they were notably also the two players who in practice had the most difficulties controlling and understanding the gameplay.<sup>5</sup> In the inexperienced group, four out of five wanted to play with at least one other player, two preferred to play again just one other player, because as they themselves put it "it is easier to overview what one other player does". In their own response to what makes SMB more interesting as a game played with others, four players stated that the game is more fun with others, one even commenting that SMB "would perhaps be fun as a

<sup>4</sup> For a further study of the effects of vertigo and physical involvement in the game space, see Johansson elsewhere in this paper collection.

<sup>5</sup> It should be duely noted that it does in fact take more time to orient yourself in the game in the multi-player mode, especially if

you are four players. In four player mode, the screen is split into four smaller screens displaying each player's monkey and his/her track, and it is much more difficult to get an overview of the game on this divided game screen.

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beer drinking game". However, when asked about what they themselves thought were the "fun" elements of SMB, only one in this group emphasised the social element.

### - *Experienced players and SMB*

All players in the experienced group stated that they would not mind playing SMB again and that they would prefer to play the game with both with others and alone. One confessed that he would play alone to practice so he could easier beat the others. However, all these players emphasised that it was the social interaction and competition against other players they personally thought provided the fun elements of the game. One describes SMB as "100% a social game!" another states that the game has a "good potential for bragging rights", a third one writes "It gives you good opportunities to tease each other", finally one outright comments that "the more people, you can gloat over, the better!"

The experience of fun seems to be closely related to the mastering of the game



### *The researcher's perspective*

From the observer's point of view, the group of experienced players seemingly had "more fun" than the inexperienced group and quickly started shouting and yelling at each other, even though they did not know each others in advance (two players explicitly mentions the "shouting and yelling" as an intrinsic part of the game experience). It is tempting to relate this slipping quickly into "having fun"-mode to the ease with which all players picked up the game and learned to control the ball. In the group of inexperienced players, the young women were not as fast as the present young men in picking up the game and throughout the test session they had problems with mastering the controls on the joypad and orienting themselves in the game. Following, this lack of adaptation to the game resulted in the girls always coming in as the last monkeys in goal in the competition games, both on the track and in the races, which in the long run made them appear less interested in playing than the men. Even though several members of the group turned out to know each other in advance, this group shouted and yelled less at each other, and I surmise there must be a relation between the inequality of the players and the either more or less social acceptability of bragging of your winnings or mocking. It is "bad style" to gloat over someone who are obviously a much worse player than you - whereas you do not commit a faux pas if you gloat over a player on the same level as you. Nevertheless, it did seem that the game overall



appealed to all the test players involved, because it was so relatively easy to learn and use and as its childish presentation of the game character's emotions did indeed ease the social interaction, centering around the competition parts of the game and the character's reactions to their wins or losses.

### FURTHER RESEARCH

A consumer survey made by IDSA (the American Game Producers Association) in 2001 revealed that 59 percent of the American respondents play with friends, and most play with a member or members of their family, whether their siblings, spouses, a parent or extended family. 33 percent play with brothers and/or sisters, 27 percent play with their spouse, 25 percent play with their parents, and 43 percent play with other family members.<sup>6</sup> This survey indicates that gaming is indeed a social activity that involves family, partners and friends.<sup>7</sup> However, a European survey of children's playing habits from the same year [6] indicates that, at least in the case of children, few family members (parents) seem to participate in their children's gaming culture. As the author of the research report on the survey notes, this marks an important difference from other media like television or books. In addition, in this survey, the children's main reference group is the peer group of *the same gender*. It would be interesting to study these patterns of social interaction in a console gaming context with adult players. Is console gaming something you do with your peers or partner rather than

your family, and does this affect your experience of this "living room" activity which does in many other aspects appear to be close to the practice of watching TV and video together? How does your choice of playing partners relate to your experience of "fun"? And what relations to your co-players are revealed through the verbal "abuse" during gameplay that seems to be such an intrinsic part of the "fun-ness" of playing a game like *Super Monkey Ball*? A closer, long-term and situated study of the uses of SMB could also reveal whether the activity of playing SMB will also extend to verbal socialising which goes beyond the strictly game-related talk when players who know each other in advance come together to play. In the opinion of the players themselves, does the "fun of gaming" also include this outside-the-game talk? Only further studies will be able to give the answers to these questions. When designing this future research, this paper will hopefully have proved that we need to integrate game studies with both cultural studies and sociological theory to fully understand the relation between social interaction and fun.

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<sup>6</sup> These numbers taken from <http://www.businesswire.com/webbox/bw.051100/201320244.htm>

<sup>7</sup> This survey is to a certain degree contradicted by a Danish survey of 620 gamers and their gaming habits. The survey showed that many Danish gamers do not use games to socialise. 68% of the gamers answered that they "play alone" and only 32% play with others (<http://www.autofire.dk/under->

[soegelse/index.html](http://www.autofire.dk/under-soegelse/index.html)). However, this survey was made in 1999, before the game consoles had really penetrated the Scandinavian market. It would be interesting to see if a similar survey made today would yield the same numbers.

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