

A Framework for Understanding Player Experiences with Controversial Game Content

Kristine Jørgensen

Department of Information Science and Media Studies

University of Bergen

P.O. Box 7800

N-5020 Bergen

+47 55 58 41 13

kristine.jorgensen@uib.no

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Debates about controversial game content such as high levels of violence or stereotypical gender representation frequently return to the mainstream media. While critics worry about the potential effects of such content on individuals and on society, players themselves often respond with statements such as “it is only a game”. What this claim actually means when playing games with controversial content, however, is unclear. Based on a qualitative study of how players describe their own experiences with controversial game content, this paper presents a framework that identifies how such content may be experienced in the gameplay context. In what situations do players experience game content as speculative, objectionable, or offensive, and in what do they experience it as a source for insight and reflection? Expanding the work of van Vught, Schott & Marczak (2012), the framework is a tool for research that highlights the players’ subjective interpretations of such content in a gameplay context; thus accommodating perspectives that challenge effect studies in terms of how the reception of controversial game content is understood.

METHOD AND THEORY

The data that forms the background for the framework stems from a four focus groups, featuring experienced players of both genders aged 21-35 with mixed educational and occupational background. The focus groups were carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method used in psychology for researching how people understand major life events and lived experiences (Smith et al 2009). Based on interviews featuring open-ended questions and prompts, the method allows respondents to talk about their experiences and interpretations on their own terms. However, the challenge of IPA is that the researcher is limited to interpreting how the individuals themselves interpret and describe their own experiences. Also, a challenge of using focus groups with IPA is that the discussions that tend to rise in such a constellation often reveal more about attitudes than experiences (Smith et al 2009). In this study, however, the focus groups the first part of a larger study featuring qualitative studies including interviews, observations, diaries, auto-ethnography and forum analyses.

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Research on controversial game content tends to be grounded in psychological effect research. This tradition is criticized for not being sensitive to the socio-cultural context, for over-interpreting correlational statistics with little attention towards contextual factors (Ferguson et al 2010), and for ignoring the playful context of such game content (Gentile & Stone 2005). With point of departure in the rising attention in game studies towards context-sensitive and experience-oriented approaches stressing that games and play may be unsafe, not fun, and have implications outside the game itself (e.g. Geertz 1973; Juul 2013; Malaby 2007, 107; Stenros 2015), this framework is grounded in the idea of *positive negative experiences* (Hopeametsä 2008, Montola 2010) that are distressing but also gratifying because they create new insights; and in *reversal theory*, which postulates that people regularly reverse between motivational states and that this explains whether people experience a certain emotion as positive or negative (Apter 1992).

RESULTS

Based in the collected data, the paper will present a preliminary framework that illustrates different ways of interpreting uncomfortable and controversial content in a gameplay context. Combing the concepts of positive negative experiences and reversal with findings from the collected data, the framework will take into account how the player's involvement with fiction and/or game mechanics affect the interpretation of certain game content. The paper will also discuss the methodological challenges that were encountered in the study and discuss their impacts on the data collection and interpretation.

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