

Social Aspects of Gaming

Following the increasing popularity of computer games and the growth of the sector, games have often been critiqued as being socially isolating. In response, many academics have explored the “social” aspects of gaming in their work, primarily focusing on massively multiplayer online games and their communities. However, many other people feel that interaction in an online game through a computer monitor and keyboard can not be compared to real, face to face interaction. Examples of this will be seen throughout the essay.

With a brief look at the history of gaming, it is seen that all genres of gaming except computer games are social events. Playing in a sports match, a poker game, or a game of monopoly with friends are all deemed to be social. What this essay seeks to establish is why computer games diverge from other types of gaming when it comes to socializing, what is being done, and what can be done, to overcome these problems.

Definition of Socializing

It is necessary to first establish what socializing means, for the purposes of this essay. The definition of socializing includes being part of a friendly group, and meeting to take part in social activities. Furthermore, the reason participants take part in this meeting is not to achieve the goal of the activity, but to do the activity together, and enjoy doing it. It is important that this distinction is made, as otherwise, activities such as work, or war, would also fit into this definition.

Although endless discussions could be conducted on how massively multiplayer online games have activities that fit this description, for the purposes of this essay, it will be assumed that any activity that is conducted in a virtual environment can not be a suitable substitute for its real world counterpart. In fact, very few activities in these games fit the definition anyway, as the participants often group together purely because they are required to, in order to achieve the goals of the activity. Furthermore, going with this definition, a typical massively multiplayer game is much more socially isolating than a singleplayer game, due to the amount of time investment it requires.

When games are viewed from this perspective, it can be said that playing any board game is social. The same can be said for most sports and card games. However, if the game is part of an event with a prize, and a participant plays to win, it ceases to be a social activity for the player. It is important to note that it can still be a social activity for other players, or the audience. Therefore, the answer to if an event is social or not, ironically, is subjective.

Where Computer Games Differ

In the early days of computer games, many games were made for two or more players on the same machine. It could be said that these formed the bridge between social gaming and solitary gaming. Over the short history of gaming, games have evolved from multiplayer single machine games into singleplayer single machine games, which have then evolved into multiplayer multi machine games. During this process, as the internet became the main method of hosting multiplayer matches, the essence of what makes gaming social was lost: meeting with friends to play and laugh together.

The first gaming computers and consoles had support for multiple controllers. Many games had support for simultaneous play. Although exact numbers are hard to obtain, for instance, approximately 50% of Amiga games were made for more than one player. This made them more similar to board games as people would come together to play, and the activity they engaged in did not feel like something completely different or alienating. Some of these games were particularly attractive to hardcore gamers playing board games with complex rule systems, since they wouldn't need to worry about rules themselves anymore, and the computer would be able to do all the calculations for them in the blink of an eye.

However, as years passed, especially when the main gaming computer became the PC, games started moving away from the old style, and became more of a solitary act. Silently staring at the monitor. Something one can do at work when the boss isn't looking. Another reason was the lack of hardware support, as PC joysticks were a rare commodity, and PC keyboards could not detect more than a few keys being pressed at the same time. The PC game industry have taken off from a few popular titles of this solitary gaming era, and expanded on the ideas, leading to many many clones of these old games, with fancier graphics.

Eventually, multiplayer support became popular in games again, but this time, not on the same computer but through networks or the internet. Hoping to attract PC gamers, most games made for new generation consoles have followed a similar path, making singleplayer games although they had the hardware to allow 4 players to play at the same time. They imitated the genres popular on the PC, making minimal use of the multiplayer potential offered by the console hardware.

Unfortunately, this series of events led to computer gaming becoming a solitary activity, with minimal need to communicate to the outside world to play the game. Early on, people would talk to each other about cheats and secrets, and share their experiences. However, as the internet started to become widely used, this form of socialization also diminished, as this information became readily accessible from websites such as gamefaqs.com. Games have also become more simplistic, to appeal to a broader audience. This in turn meant players did not have as many things to share with each other about their gameplay experience, as they did not feel like what they were doing would be interesting enough to share with their friends.

LAN Gaming

Although it is not necessary to socialize in order to play games anymore, many gamers who enjoy playing in a social environment strive to do so, by organizing events called LAN parties. Many friends bring their computers to the same location, networking them and playing together for countless hours, perhaps days. These parties are generally done in a very communal way; everyone is responsible for bringing their own computers, the host provides the networking, everyone pays their part of the bill for the food and drinks. After the event, everyone helps clean up the place. At this point, gaming stops being a solitary act, and becomes a social activity again. A group of friends meeting to play games, for the sole purpose of having fun together.

One of the reasons LAN parties were hosted in the past was because of the faster connection speed, but even now, where everyone has high speed broadband, LAN gaming is still popular. The fact that gamers feel the need to move their computers all the way to a friend's house to play in the same room when they could always play together through the internet proves that socializing through a monitor can not be compared to socializing with people in the same room. This shows that some aspects of social life can never be replicated through computer interaction.

Finding a Suitable Game

The hardest part of LAN gaming is generally finding which game to play. As playing in a social environment is very different to playing by yourself, games tend to give different degrees of pleasure. Immersion is out of the question. Gameplay needs to be relatively simple, so someone new to the game can still hop in and play. The learning curve needs to be shallow, or transparent. An exception is, of course, if everyone already knows the game. This is why gamers sometimes decide on what games they will play a few days before the LAN party, so people can familiarize themselves with the gameplay beforehand. The deeper the game is, the more players will need to concentrate in order to make decisions, leading to a more solitary experience. Thus, simple games are generally more suitable for LAN gaming. This way, players need to worry less about the game itself, and can talk about other subjects while playing.

Another important aspect is pacing. A timeout period is imperative, especially in action games. Having short matches means players have time to talk in between, perhaps cheer at their victory, or discuss further strategies. In many ways, slow games become more social as people have more time to talk about things. An example of such a game would be *Europa 1400*. While there is a fast forward button in the singleplayer mode, it is left out in the multiplayer mode; every player has to manage their shops and wait until the goods are produced. One hour in game corresponds to about fifteen seconds in multiplayer. While the day starts at 7 am, the player's workers come at 8 am. On a busy day, the player will want to send goods to the marketplace twice, once around noon and once at around 7 pm. The rest of the day is spent looking around the town, perhaps applying for a new position in the political chain, and talking to friends outside the game while waiting. Even though work ends at 7 to 9 pm (adjustable by the appropriate person in the government), the day does not end until 11 pm, so players have extra time to finish up and relax. At the end of the day, elections take place, and players have a chance to review their budgets.

It can be seen that *Europa 1400* has a lot of timeout periods, leading to a very social experience when played in a LAN. Another example of the use of timeouts would be the game *Planetside*. Although it is an MMOFPS, it is not uncommon for players to play it in LAN parties, as it rewards teamwork no matter how small the team is. In a typical battle, players designate an enemy base as the target, engage the enemy in an outdoors battle leading to the base, eventually securing the courtyard, working their way inside, blowing up the enemy spawn tubes and hacking their control console. At this point, they have to wait 15 minutes for the base to become captured. This gives players the time they need to discuss further strategies, drink to their victory, or just share funny moments that came up during the assault.

In summary, a game best suited for LAN gaming would be one with simple rules, and plenty of timeouts. Of course, it also needs to encourage and reward player interaction, as coming together to play feels pointless if the players are essentially playing on their own.

Internet Cafes & Tournaments

The idea of LAN gaming also expands to different areas. Internet cafes offer gamers the opportunity to show off their skills, and possibly make new friends. In this aspect, they are very similar to how arcade machines worked in the past. Playing a game for countless hours, mastering every aspect of it, and demonstrating skill to other gamers. Doing a series of special moves in *Tekken 3* to take out an opponent before he can touch the player's character only feels as satisfying as the number of people watching him do it.

Another area that LAN gaming branches to is tournaments. What initially starts off as a friends coming together to play sometimes becomes so large, gamers need to ask companies for sponsorship in order to host these events. Nowadays these tournaments attract so much attention, companies host them themselves, with prizes. But this defeats the main purpose of LAN gaming for many gamers - they come together to socialize, not to win money.

Tournaments are home to a lot of social activity. Many gamers participate for the prizes, but many others go there to meet others and share their experiences. Since these tournaments follow a set schedule, people have a lot of time to wander around and socialize between the matches they need to take part in. They might spend some time discussing strategies between matches, perhaps ask for tips from more experienced players, or maybe just watch other people compete and talk to other observers about the game. In later stages of tournaments, this is sometimes taken to an even bigger scale, as competitors' screens are projected on walls or widescreen TV's, where everyone can watch what is going on. Watching the game then becomes similar to how people would watch a sports game on TV.

It should be noted that this does not make the activity social for the gamer himself. Large scale tournaments are hardly social for most of the competitive participants. However, although this doesn't make the "gameplay" social, it makes "gaming" social. When the spectators play the game later with their friends, they have something to talk about that is related to the game. Perhaps something new they can show their friends inside the game. Of course, in order to do that they need to meet up and play together. Thus, it can be said that large scale tournaments make gamers want to host small scale LAN parties.

Consoles & Hotseat Gaming

Although most current games on consoles are following the mainstream, some games shine out with their social features. *Super Smash Bros Melee* has extremely simple gameplay, but it is very popular because of the potential fun gamers can have in a multiplayer session. Same could be said about the *Worms* series, and *WarioWare*. Similar to how some games are suitable for socializing in a LAN party, these games are suitable for socializing, but this time using a console or a single computer. What makes these games different is their inherently social design. Although most games played on LAN parties are not originally designed with LAN gaming in mind, and just happen to have the features LAN gamers look for, these console/hotseat games are specifically designed to be played with a group of friends, in a social environment. Without friends, they become dull. It can be said that these games are inherently social.

The recent popularity of the Wii is also due to the social potential of the console. Especially with games like *WarioWare* and *WiiSports*, it advertised itself as a console to be played with family and friends. Although many people dismissed it and called it a “toy”, many others believed it embraced the essence of gaming, much like board or card games. The simplistic nature of the games released for the console show that the developers were intending for these games to be played in a social environment as well.

Conclusion

As can be seen, over the years computer gaming has become a solitary activity, because of the direction game developers have taken. However, some developers still focus on the social side of gaming, and release games that appeal to gamers who wish to socialize while playing. Developers aren't the only ones trying to make gaming social either; groups of gamers come together to organize events, to play in social environments. These gamers are always on the lookout for games that have social potential in them, although the games they choose are generally not designed to be social intentionally by the developers, but “accidentally” happen to catch the essence of LAN gaming.

Nonetheless, games are only as social as the player wants them to be. Although many gamers strive to hold onto the social environment around them by playing social games or organizing events to play together with friends, many others simply prefer to isolate themselves in their room and play by themselves in a silent environment. It might be wrong to say that video games themselves are socially isolating, but they definitely allow a socially isolated person to entertain themselves, and perhaps that is the real problem, one that would best be addressed in another essay. Games will remain social as long as there are gamer groups who want to socialize. Whether these groups will die out eventually because of the lack of social games, only time will tell.

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