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HCDE 313
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January 28, 2015

Observing Indie Game Activity Contexts

Video games have become ubiquitous cultural artifacts—both a multibillion-dollar industry and a part of everyday life (Pitcher, 2014). Video games, while played as entertainment, reflect engagement in social life and cultural products. They are embedded in cultural values and the contextual social spaces they inhabit (Winner, 1999). The vast majority of games are developed by major studios and financed by publishing firms intent on creating games for mass appeal. There is however a growing movement of game designers and developers seeking to push the boundaries of games as mature form of art and expression.

This study explores the practices involving the playing of independently developed games (also known as indie games) in gamers' natural play spaces. We examine how gamers interact with such games, what emotional feedback is experienced by gamers, as well as explore how game design elements influence emotions and values. We also explore possible external activities motivated by playing such games.

This research intends to influence future design and development work for developing games as valuable cultural artifacts that effectively reflect human values and support emotional feedback, as well as expose potential new dimensions for game design.

Using the data gathered in this study, we identify how player emotions and game design intersect and elicit design considerations for developing such future games.

Methodology

We used a mixture of observation with condensed ethnographic study. These methods were used to elicit both general data and specific information on game activities. A condensed ethnographic study enables me to engage with the subject directly and come to understand their activity contexts and mental model.

We conducted three study sessions, each ranging from thirty to forty-five minutes: one general observation and two focused observations with a following interview with a

series of pre-planned and improvised follow-up questions. Notes were recorded using pen and paper.

All studies were conducted in various computer labs in Mary Gates Hall. The selection criteria was as follows:

- An accessible technology space
- A space where people play video games regularly
- A space where it is acceptable for people to play video games

The computer labs were viable contextual spaces because gaming is a common day-to-day occurrence in the labs. Students used the accessible technology or their own computers to play games. It was acceptable for individuals to play games in the labs, provided they do not make too much noise to disturb others' studying.

Subjects were selected and interviewed based on the following criteria:

- Subject plays video games
- Subject is currently playing a video game in the current space
- Subject is in their natural context in which to play video games
- Subject consents to being observed and interviewed

Subjects were experienced players in a variety of games and were playing games for leisure within the lab space. We began subject observation by introducing myself and stating my intentions as a researcher. Subjects were then asked for their consent to be observed and interviewed. The aim to acquire consent was to limit the potential influence of the Hawthorne Effect and inform subjects how their information will be and will not be used out of concern for their privacy. Once consent was granted, observational work began.

We observed whichever game the subject was playing at the time, making sure to not prompt the subject for a use-case. When observing participants, we took note of their basic mechanical interactions when interfacing with the game as well as what activities within the game they engaged in. After observation, participants were asked open questions to unveil potential insights into game and game-related activities. Questions were kept short and concise.

- What motivates you to play this game?
- Has this game taught you anything as a person?
- What emotions do you experience while playing this game?

- How do you feel when playing this game?
- Do you feel connected with in-game elements?
- Do you have a preference for indie games or major titles?
- What activities are influenced/motivated by the games you play?

When subjects provided detailed responses, more focused follow-up questions were asked. At the end of each session, notes were transcribed onto a Google Document. Qualitative coding and analysis was conducted on the data to identify video game activities, the environmental context of each session, and the subject's practices and mental processes. Coded practices included activities such as game navigation, emotional feedback, and information seeking practices (See Figure 1). These coded practices were then analyzed and interpreted into meaningful patterns by which to broaden understanding of the activities around playing indie games as well as elicit design implications and requirements for future game development work.

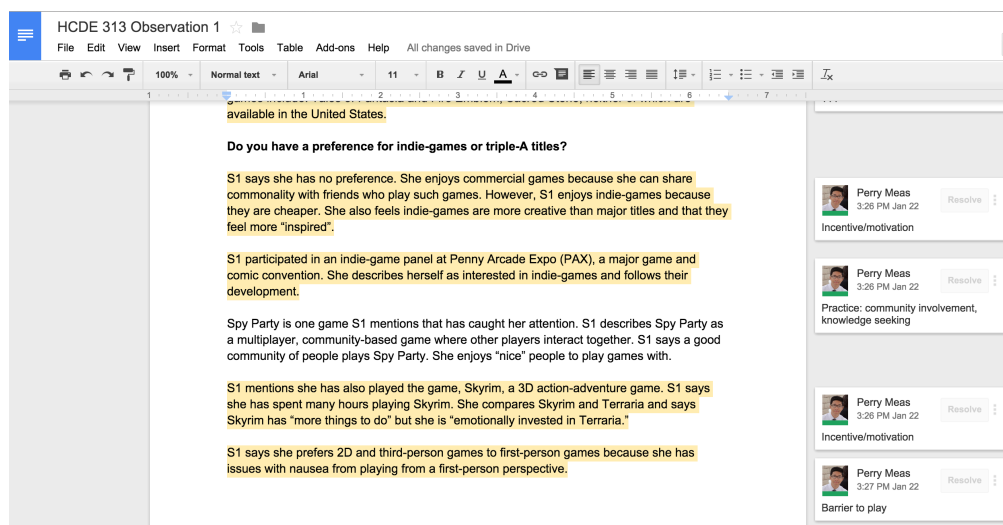


Figure 1. Coding process in GoogleDocs

Results

Each of the three study sessions proceeded smoothly with no interruptions, issues, or anomalies. Three different games in total were observed, two of which were with one-on-one subjects, and one with a large group of subjects. These games included: Terraria, a 2D open adventure game (See Figure 2); League of Legends, a 3D competitive multiplayer combat game (See Figure 3); and Papers Please, a 2D puzzle game based in a totalitarian society setting (See Figure 4).



Figure 2. A screenshot of the Terraira environment and interface

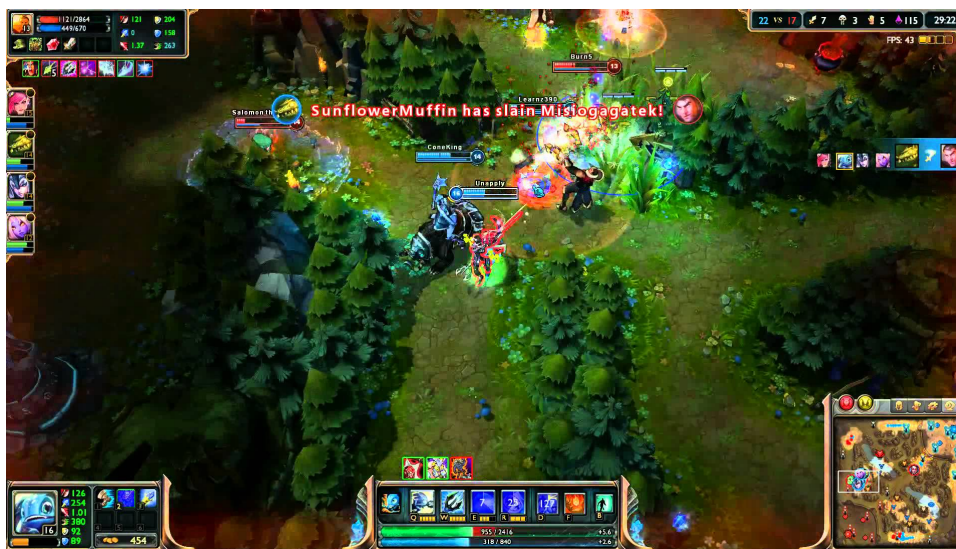


Figure 3. A screenshot of a competitive match in League of Legends

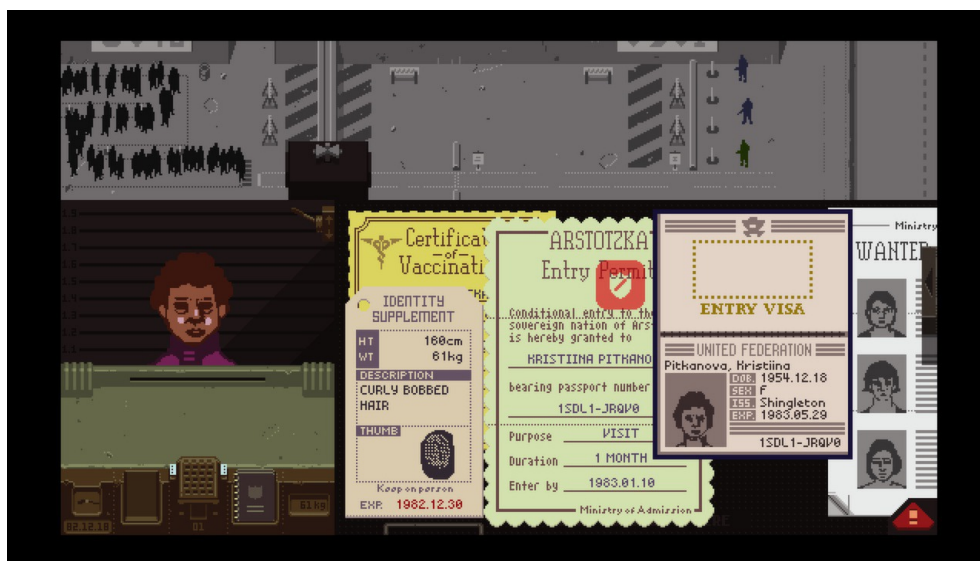


Figure 4. A screenshot from *Papers Please*

After analysis work of coding and interpreting the observation and interview data, we developed insight into the practices, motivations, contexts, and emotional experiences associated with games and indie game playing.

Motivations behind play

Subjects have diverse motivations for playing indie games. Indie games are more affordable than major titles and are often only available for purchase online, making them readily available to play. Players often discover such niche-interest games via online and play them to satisfy their curiosity. Students will often play such games during breaks between studying or at social events. These games such as *Terraria* and *Papers Please* are described by subjects as “relaxing.” The social aspect of many collaborative, competitive multiplayer games such as *League of Legends* is another major motivating factor, as players work together to achieve game objectives, satisfying a possible desire for social inclusion and camaraderie. Indie games were perceived by subjects as exercises in artistic freedom and were more creative and “inspired” than major titles. Major titles were described as “safe investments” and “conventional”. This perceived creativity on behalf of indie games may add to their appeal.

Games motivate external activities

Games are used for teaching and learning activities, even if the game is not meant for such. A subject used game media to demonstrate computer technology. Additionally, games can prompt information seeking or knowledge-building activities such as the exploration of topical subjects related to games such as *Papers Please* or *Braid*, as well as searching for information on the development history of certain games such as *Terraria*. Through play, the gamer may be prompted to explore topical subjects such as with *Braid*.

Moral or ethical conflicts in play

Indie games such as can introduce moral conflicts or themes as series of in-game actions and choices to varying degrees of effectiveness. Papers Please was described as provoking substantial moral questions and playing on human emotions. However, while some games may provide plot-based incentives or attempt to create an emotional context for completing tasks, these incentives are not enough for stimulating emotional feedback if they do not translate into gameplay mechanics or if the player feels disconnected from the in-game choices they make as players.

As with Papers Please, the intended emotional effect of having to earn a wage to care for the main character's family was lost because the player's in-game choices did not have a visible impact on gameplay. A subject stated that he did not meet or see the family in-game and their potential deaths did not affect gameplay or the main character in any way. The subject described the plot devices as being ineffective precisely because the game's various conclusions did not feel substantially different from one another. If there is no perceived impact or developed sense of urgency from the player's decisions in the game, the emotional effect or incentive becomes squandered or non-existent.

Communities of play

A subject's discussion of non-game, but still game-related activities such as attending gaming conventions, costume playing (cosplay), and the development of third-party content produced by players and used by other players suggests wider communities of play. Playing indie games possibly both reflect and motivate community involvement as players seek out others who engage in indie games with similar interests.

Study subjects also described indie game developers as "in-tuned" with their user base, expanding the conceptualization of the video game community as not just players but also incorporative of a game's producers.

Player biases and predispositions

Players bring their biases and predispositions into games and game playing activities. These biases affect how they perceive and play games. This was noted when a subject mentioned he did not like to judge people in a game that requires him to judge people. Another subject did not want to name specific niche-interest games out of embarrassment, reflecting possible social norms concerning content acceptability of media.

Players form their own incentives

In the absence of emotional incentives designed into game activity, a player may develop their own incentives. This was observed when a subject mentioned they feel

compelled to preserve the lives of non-player game characters because they had unique identifying names. Subjects also expressed co-creation and collaboration with other players as effective incentives and sources of enjoyment and engagement in games that were not necessarily made for collaboration.

Reflection

This project attempted a novel approach toward studying players in their natural context for playing games and sought to elicit valuable insight into the intersection of emotions, motivations, and game activities. It is important to note that this project was limited in its scope, seeking out a very niche activity context in a somewhat novel subject field. There were a limited number of observed subjects and study sessions. Determining what to observe and interpret was a challenge, as subject's activities (outside of keyboard and mouse) were mediated entertainment forms in a digital environment. One had to pay attention to their often face-paced on-screen activities. Therefore, developing a series of requirements and interpreting data was difficult.

Additionally, while games have been used as storytelling mediums for decades, it is only recently that there has been a movement to develop games with explicit emotional goals. There were only three games observed during this study, a miniscule fraction of the growing indie genre. Only one of those games, Papers Please, attempted to introduce emotional incentives as part of gameplay. Nevertheless, during interviews subjects did recommend exploring other games for future study. At the same time, this is a new and exciting field for potential research into the growing community and individual practices within indie game development.

The research phase combined both observation and elements of contextual inquiry via condensed ethnographic interviewing were useful for exploring both game mechanics and emotional feedback and how they interacted or failed to interact. However, the majority of valuable and in-depth insights on emotions and external practices came from subject interviews, not from solely observing them.

Because of the limited time afforded to preparing the study, questions and research methods were developed and performed ad hoc. Improvisation was a common theme throughout the research process, which afforded great flexibility and adaptability during subject-researcher interactions. However, other follow-up questions that were overlooked could have been asked. These include:

- What features of the game are impactful/effective?
- What features of the game are ineffective?
- Are any of your personal views informed by the game?
- What do you do before you prepare to play a game?

Future study design would capitalize on further inquiry opportunities while still maintaining an improvisational aspect. Also, an increase in study participants that play a great diversity series of games would afford even more potentially valuable insights and data.

Design Implications

Through the interpretation of study results, we were able to form a series of brief, rudimentary design implications and considerations for future indie game work that intersect player activities with game mechanics.

Designing for effective emotional feedback should reflect playable game elements rather than a constructed plot separate from gameplay. Visible and perceptible impact of plot elements on gameplay potentially affords more effective emotional feedback and the development of more robust emotional incentives for game activities.

Future game development should consider player's predisposition and biases as potential opportunities for game mechanics that challenge, play on, or reinforce underlying beliefs or cognitive processes. As one subject noted, playing a game that contradicted his personal beliefs made for a reflective and thought-provoking experience. There is great potential to use games as didactic mediums to elicit reflection and emotional or cognitive feedback, pointing to the recent trend toward the gamification of learning (Gee, 2012). Following a similar trend, there is potential for collaborative games to apply the same didactic methodology. Designing a multiplayer game that provokes emotions or reactions in groups of players would add a further layer of interactivity between not only between player and games but also across many players for group learning activities.

Future games could be designed for open interpretation to maximize players' sense of control and agency. Open world games are appealing because they afford players the ability to create and self-direct, often forming idiosyncratic personal motivations for play activities.

Future Research

As noted earlier, we intend for future studies to expand on interview questions to elicit detailed and valuable feedback into indie game play activities. We hope to also dive into specific questions of values, ethics, and embedded politics within game media. In a future interview study, we can inquire deeper into these concepts as well as ideas around game communities. We also intend to explore different location contexts for study and observe if setting makes a difference in game-related activities.

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Appendix 1. Planning materials

Study Questions:

- What motivates you to play this game?
- Has this game taught you anything as a person?
- What emotions do you experience while playing this game?
- How do you feel when playing this game?
- Do you feel connected with in-game elements?
- Do you have a preference for indie games or major titles?
- What activities are influenced/motivated by the games you play?

Appendix 2. Field notes

Meas, Perry
HCDE 313
January 18, 2015

Observation:

8:27 PM

I am in the TE Lab of Mary Gates Hall. At this late in the evening, there are only a handful of people, all students, spread out among the many computers.

Subject 1 (S1) is seated next to me with her laptop open. She is taking a break from studying to play an indie-game called: Terraria. I ask if I may observe her playing the game.

Terraria is an 2D, open-exploration game where players interact with the game world by exploring environments, mining for raw materials, building structures, collaborating with other players, and fighting enemies. Game elements are visualized as small sprites and squares that can be manipulated.

S1 mentions she has disabled a setting which keeps track of how long she has been playing a game because she is embarrassed at how long she has spent playing Terraria.

S1 appears to have three different character avatars to choose from, all of which are custom-made as allowed by the game. S1 selects 'Hard Mode' and begins playing. Her 2D avatar appears in a small room complete with a bed and room décor (bookshelves, tables, and carpeting). S1 is occasionally looking at a small mini-map representation of the game world as she navigates the game space.

S1 encounters in-game enemies and does battle with them using an assortment of weapons to defend her avatar. The enemies are soon defeated in a hail of splashing colors and lights. S1 continues playing.

The environment S1 navigates is a vast mountain range complete with blue skies and several structures.

8:33 PM

S1 comes upon a town-like area with several non-player characters (NPCs). At the same time, an in-game event begins. S1 describes the event as an invasion of computer enemies. In the bottom corner of the screen, a line of text reads: "Pirates have arrived."

Suddenly, a large wave of enemies come upon S1 and the town she is at. She begins shooting the computer enemies with a gun and flies around on a jetpack to avoid death.

8:37 PM

S1's avatar is on the verge of death as denoted by a line of red hearts on the screen. Her avatar runs around to find sources of in-game health to prevent her death. Enemies killed explode into bloody chunks. S1 leverages in-game mechanics called spells to enhance her avatar's performance in battle.

8:40 PM

S1 is killed by a horde of enemies. Her avatar reappears away from the battle, but she immediately runs around back to the fight. S1 also makes an effort to defend the town NPCs from enemies.

8:41 PM

All enemies are defeated. S1's town and NPCs are safe and preserved.

In-game, it has now become night. A new event has been triggered. S1 describes this event as a "blood moon" which signals the incoming threat of difficult enemies. A red moon icon appears at the top of the screen.

Moments later, a large number of new enemies appear in-game and begin to attack S1's avatar. S1 again defends herself with weapons and spells.

A giant skeleton enemy appears on the screen and begins attacking S1 with a barrage of sword weapons. S1 dances around the game on her jetpack to avoid getting killed again.

8:45 PM

S1 mentions that she has an added incentive to defeating the skeleton. If S1's avatar dies again, the skeleton will disappear and the in-game blood moon event will be over. However, if she defeats the skeleton, S1 will gain a variety of improvements and rewards in the form of items for her character.

The skeleton is near defeat now. S1 hovers her mouse over the skeleton monster to see its remaining health points.

8:48 PM

The skeleton is defeated and a number of in-game rewards fall from its remains for S1 to collect.

S1 mentions that the game includes a clock to observe the night and day hours. Right now it is 2:28 AM in the game. Soon, daylight will dawn. S1 also mentions that another event, a solar eclipse, will incur another major battle if it were to occur.

S1 continues on after the skeleton battle and begins to explore new regions of the game world. S1 calls the region she is now in "The Hallow" which has a series of difficult and challenging enemies to battle.

S1 says she has built a wall around The Hallow to prevent the proliferation of enemies interfering around the game world.

S1 returns to her town and interacts with some of the NPCs to acquire items for her avatar. She then logs out of the avatar she is currently playing with and chooses one of her two other avatars to begin playing with.

8:53 PM

S1's avatar appears in an entirely new game area. Her avatar inhabits a different space in the midst of a large town-like area complete with many NPCs. She opens doors and interacts with the town-elements by clicking.

S1 navigates into a large room area filled with storage bins she uses to transfer items between her three different avatars.

8:55 PM

S1 is transferring items between her avatars as a form of maintenance when she is not exploring the world or in battle. After doing her work, she returns her avatar to its in-game residence.

S1 opens a menu, saves her game data, and quits Terraria.

Interview:

After the observation, I begin asking S1 a series of questions about her play experience:

What motivates you to play Terraria?

S1 says Terraria is good for stress relief. She also enjoys connecting with other players in-game and collaborates with them. Terraria also has a "cute" factor. S1 also mentions Terraria has a "cute" musical score, but it can become frightening or "creepy" at times during battle events. Enemies in-game are also visualized as frightening, creepy, and scary. S1 describes herself as very easily frightened.

Has Terraria taught you anything as a person?

S1 says she has been playing Terraria for a long time. She enjoys reading about the history of the game and the people who developed it.

Have you used Terraria for anything else besides play?

S1 says she has. She used Terraria as an environment to teach others about virtual environments and game artificial intelligence for a class project.

Do you feel a connection to the non-player characters?

S1 says "not really." However, she does mention that the NPCs are given unique character names. If S1 sees an NPC with a name she "likes", she will try to defend the NPC from death to

preserve the character and their unique name. NPCs according to S1 also provide added benefits to her avatar character in the form of purchasable items, spells, and improvements (which she calls “buffs”). NPCs also help prevent S1’s avatar’s death during battle. These are added incentives for S1 to defend the lives of these computer-generated characters.

Do you play other indie-games?

S1 says she plays other indie games that she would rather not mention by name. She also says she plays games more on the Nintendo DS platform rather than a computer. Most of the games she plays are imported from Japan. Of the ones she does mention by name, these games include: Tales of Fantasia and Fire Emblem, Sacred Stone, neither of which are available in the United States.

Do you have a preference for indie-games or triple-A titles?

S1 says she has no preference. She enjoys commercial games because she can share commonality with friends who play such games. However, S1 enjoys indie-games because they are cheaper. She also feels indie-games are more creative than major titles and that they feel more “inspired”.

S1 participated in an indie-game panel at Penny Arcade Expo (PAX), a major game and comic convention. She describes herself as interested in indie-games and follows their development.

Spy Party is one game S1 mentions that has caught her attention. S1 describes Spy Party as a multiplayer, community-based game where other players interact together. S1 says a good community of people plays Spy Party. She enjoys “nice” people to play games with.

S1 mentions she has also played the game, Skyrim, a 3D action-adventure game. S1 says she has spent many hours playing Skyrim. She compares Skyrim and Terraria and says Skyrim has “more things to do” but she is “emotionally invested in Terraria.”

S1 says she prefers 2D and third-person games to first-person games because she has issues with nausea from playing from a first-person perspective.

S1 continues by saying that indie-games give players the capacity to be creative through the development of third-party content called modifications or mods. S1 feels that indie-game developers are more in tuned with their user base.

Are there any non-game activities that are motivated by you playing certain games?

S1 says she and her roommate create fan-art for Terraria and other games such as Persona and Fire Emblem. S1 also costume-plays (cosplays) as characters from games for fun. She is also involved at the UW costume club and she plans to attend Sakura Con this year.

I conclude the interview session here and ask my participant if there are communities I could reach out to for other studies and observations.

S1 mentions the UW Game Development Club as one. Informatics Game Night is an event to explore this week. There is also the Emerald City Comic Convention, but that is in March.

I thank S1 for her time and give her cookies, a bottle of Snapple, and fried noodles for her time.

Meas, Perry

HCDE 313

January 18, 2015

HCDE 313 – Observational Study 2 (1/23/2015)

Observation:

11:01 PM

The computer lab in Mary Gates Hall is filled to the brim with students. Yelling and screaming permeates the walls. Tonight is the quarterly IUGA Game Night and students are playing competitive multiplayer games. Defense of the Ancients to League of Legends to Pokemon.

11:02 PM

Amidst the shouts and hollering, laughing, oo's and ahh's, there is the sound of rapid clicking and keyboard mashing. The lab is warm; the air is humid. Students, or in this case, players are jumping in their seats with intense focus on their faces. An audience sitting behind cheer on. Large groups of students are huddled around one of the many screen projectors playing console games. Others sit quietly in the center of it all with board games. They pass around cards amidst calm stares.

There is so much happening all at once I can hardly keep up.

11:06 PM

I walk into the second computer lab: a long hallway of computers lined on stretches of tables. There are less people present, but the room is as ever bit as loud. People are lined together on separate computers all playing the same game: Defense of the Ancients. They shout and scream and work as a team in competitive multiplayer.

A smaller handful of people are playing another game: League of Legends. Everyone in the room is clicking at lightening pace. They need a fifth person to play, so I join them in playing.

I download the game and begin setting up.

11:12 PM

The game is ready to play. I am on a team of five, and we plan on challenging five others sitting directly across from us at another table. The majority of the people here say they are experienced players. I have played League of Legends before, but only on occasion. I am severely outclassed. Everyone introduces themselves and shakes each others hands.

League of Legends is an online multiplayer combat strategy game where players control individual characters with unique abilities.

Before the game begins, people in my team call for a huddle. We make our plans, whispering to one another. With a resounding "hoorah" we return to the computers.

The game begins and the five of us stand together at the start of the game. We navigate around the game environment. I go alone into an area filled with trees and grass and take cover from our impending opponents. The environment is pristine, full of color and dynamism. River valleys, stone paved roads, great fortresses, dense forests, stony mountains and bare cliff faces of grey and red stone.

11:15 PM

Combat between the two parties has begun. Our characters fight with one another or flee. Some of us are killed and we wait a few seconds before being thrown back into battle. In the game, one can acquire items to improve capabilities, and my teammates and I do just that.

When one of my team members die in combat, they shout and curse and slam their fists on the table. Others shout for us to come together and work as a unit. One of my teammates is swearing at the top of her lungs and apologizes and laughs for doing so.

I look at our opponents sitting across from us. They are engaged and focused. They aren't as loud as us. They whisper to each other to coordinate their attacks.

Throughout the game, I die constantly and fail to provide any meaningful support to my team. My other teammates, being as experienced as they are, are performing well and our team seems to be doing well overall. Game visuals flutter about in colorful flashes and explosions. Game characters run about the environment.

I look around the room and I notice smaller groups of people seated around computers playing different games.

11:20 PM

Our team is being beaten back by our opponents. One by one my team is wiped out. I too wait to rejoin the battle after I am killed. "We can do this," many of us chant. But by now, the disparity in performance has shown as we are at the brink of defeat. Our opponents swarm us and we band together before them to put up one last fight.

11:35 PM

In our final stand, our team is disoriented and clamoring to not die. Shouting and yelling amounts to confusion and communication issues. We have difficulty timing our attacks.

11:38 PM

We have been defeated. The players in front of us cheer in their seats. My team is disappointed, but elates in the entertainment. There is a feeling of camaraderie as we did our best. My teammates banter and rank as would good friends.

Meas, Perry

HCDE 313

January 18, 2015

HCDE 313 – Observational Study 3 (1/23/2015)

Observation:

11:40 PM

I walk into the computer lab in Mary Gates Hall. Tonight is IUGA Game Night, and the room is packed full of students huddled around multiple game consoles, computers, and TV screens. I had just come from the lab next door after participating in another observation of a play session, which I also took part in as part of a team effort.

I catch S2 sitting in the corner with a group of people around a TV and an Xbox. Prior to Game Night, S2 told me of a game he likes to play. I hail him and begin to inquire him about the game.

11:42 PM

S2 brings his laptop over and begins the game: Papers Please, a 2D puzzle indie game where the player takes the role of a border officer in charge of allowing or denying immigrants entry into a fictional totalitarian country. The game's mechanics are simple. The player interacts with passports by clicking and dragging and must read the documents to identify discrepancies or patterns that will allow or deny a person entry into the country.

The game's visuals are also simple and sprite-like, harkening back to the 1980s which the game is set in. The environment is made up of two windows: a window showing the concrete and barbed wire border and a window where the player interacts with passports and immigrants. There is dark ominous music. S2 taps his fingers to the deep bass notes. After a moment, the music stops and is replaced by the ambience of a border crossing line: cold wind, chattering, echoing announcements on a PA.

11:47 PM

The game is divided into days. Each day is a set of challenges and obstacles and complex puzzles. On the first day, S2 meets the first immigrant. S2 is handed a document and he reads it for a moment. He then drags the document to a stamp and marks: "Approved". The immigrant proceeds through the gate.

S2 mentions the game presents and explores a series of "moral quandaries". Apparently, the main character, the border guard, has a family. His incentive to working as such is to feed his family. Each day, the player receives points as a wage based on the number of immigrants approved entry.

11:55 PM

Day 1 ends after S2 goes through a few immigrants and a tally shows the wage he has earned. S2 then is presented with a choice in how to use his meager wage: does he use the money to buy food or medicine for his family? S2 chooses food and his earnings become next to zero. These choices are presented as text to be read and selected using a mouse.

11:57 PM

Day 2 begins. Spite figures come and go as S2 denies or approves their entry into the country. Each consecutive day, the game becomes more complex. The player must follow the rules in which to allow entry. Each day, the rules change or more rules are added, making the player's job of deciphering passports more difficult. Additionally, the passports the player must work through become more complex themselves. Failure to allow or deny the proper immigrants into the country will cost the player in their wage.

11:58 PM

S2 describes the moral quandaries of sympathizing with immigrants who do not have the proper passports to enter the country but make their case for wanting to do so. S2 also mentions that if his family become sick or starving, they can die if the player does not have enough money to buy food and medicine.

12:02 AM

An immigrant comes up to the window with what appears to be a mask. S2 tries to decipher the identity of the character, but is unable to. He denies that person entry but is promptly

penalized for doing so. S2 says he feels frustrated when he incurs a penalty because he failed to allow the proper immigrants into the country.

We end the observation session and I begin asking S2 a series of questions.

Interview:

What motivates you to play Papers Please?

S2 heard of the game through a podcast by TV show host, Kevin Pereira, who was formerly the host of Attack of the Show, a program on game journalism. S2 at some point received a beta key to play the game before it was formally released to the public. S2 describes him as “getting hooked.” S2 said the premise of the game sounded boring at first but the game proved to be incredibly fun. When the game was formally released, S2 bought the game as part of an indie bundle sale with a multitude of other games. Papers Please was affordable for S2.

Has Papers Please taught you anything personally?

S2 says “not really.” However, S2 goes on to describe the game as opening a discussion on moral quandaries. The game “plays on human emotions” and feels “substantial” and helps “reinforce” such emotions.

What emotions do you experience while playing Papers Please?

S2 reflects on his dislike for “judging people.” He tries to find reasons to allow people entry into the country no matter how obvious the danger is. S2 mentions his roommate does the opposite and finds reasons to always deny entry.

Do you feel a connection with the NPCs?

S2 says not really. He says he plays the game for its qualities and gameplay, not its emotional appeal. S2 says while the game presents a series of “moral quandaries”, the effects of the player’s moral choices are never seen. The main character’s family is only mentioned in a series of text prompts before and after each day in the game. In the end, S2 says “the family doesn’t matter in the end,” as the game has multiple endings, none of which truly affect the player’s character. This is one element of the game that S2 says is “not executed very well.” Nevertheless, S2 states he plays not for points, but for enjoyment and the story.

Do you have a preference for indie-games or triple-A titles?

S2 says triple-A games are great, but there is more “artistic freedom in indie games.” S2 mentions other games such as Limbo, Braid, and Shovel Knight as exemplars. S2 says indie games share more personal stories.

While S2 has no real preference, S2 says indie games can be more “daring” and “experimental” with their game mechanics and design. S2 says triple-A games are made to make money as “safe investments” and indie games are more akin to “personal expression.”

Are there any non-game activities that are motivated by you playing certain games?

S2 says he has no major activities motivated by indie games. However, he mentions the game Braid as one that captures his interest and curiosity. S2 says the game explores the “psychology of relationships,” a topic he is greatly interested in. The game was “deep” and prompted his thinking on subjects such as stalking and relationship violence.

S2 continues on by saying personal elements can be expressed in indie games like Braid because indie game development teams are smaller and focused.