

Assignment 4

Karaoke - Behavioural changes of a Non-Game considered as a Game

Games can drastically alter the behaviours of the players within its social contract. Some non-games can be viewed as games, either by modifying a non-game or redefining a game. This report will use Juul's[1] Classic Game Model as a game definition. Consequently, this would also describe what a non-game is - some examples Juul brings up are freeform play and noble war.

Following Juul's definition, karaoke, an activity where people sing along to recorded music with a microphone[2], would not be considered as a game. Here, it should be noted that karaoke begins the moment the participants enter the karaoke room(the stage if it is a bar, the room if it's a KTV or at home) and ends when they leave. Certain aspects of Juul's variables could be altered to gamify aspects as well. It would be beneficial to first discuss each game feature defined within the classic game model.

Karaoke as a non-game

Rules

Juul's model defines a game as having well defined, fixed rules. Karaoke has no explicit rules - those who enter the karaoke room can technically choose not to sing, or sing into the microphone without playing a backing track at all. There is a line between singing and karaoke, however. Singing is defined as the "production of musical tones with the human voice"[3], while karaoke specifically is the singing-along to recorded music void of vocals, often with lyrics displayed on a video screen[4]. Mitsui[5] elaborates on this, stating that "a device for the instantaneous selection of a song" and "a microphone along with an echo effecter" are requirements. Although typical participants vocally sing to the recorded music, there are no fixed rules to dictate what or how the singer(s) need to sing, such that participants could clap to the beat of the backing track. There could be external rules that restrict or govern the participants, depending on the context and situation. These external rules can be due to monetary, social, location, or even technical restrictions, amongst others. For example, some karaoke boxes[5] require participants to pay for a limited number of backing tracks to be played by the karaoke machine, or for only a limited amount of time in the karaoke room. In a social setting, singing along to the backing track may be enforced due to peer pressure. Yet, since none of these "rules" are inherent to the concept of karaoke, they would not be part of the gameplay according to Juul.

Variable, Quantifiable Outcomes

Without explicitly fixed rules, the scope of possible outcomes are too large to consider all of them - the outcomes of Karaoke are *not* beyond discussion, which, according to Juul, is what a quantifiable outcome is. Aimed at the public, karaoke could be considered to be interesting to many different demographics. Those who cannot sing

may still enjoy karaoke in alternate ways, for example watching others sing, or clapping to the beat. Other participants may accidentally injure themselves during karaoke, which may still be considered as part of the outcome. Social settings introduce many new possibilities as well. The reaction of the audience could be part of the outcome too - others may join you if sung well, the amount of applause after a song, or the feeling of togetherness if the participants are drunk could all be valid outcomes. Yet, all of them are difficult to quantify. Since there are no rules to uphold, the outcomes are ambiguous.

Valorization of the Outcome

Without clear variable and quantifiable outcomes, the value of any possible outcome is ambiguous as well. What makes karaoke challenging would be unique for each person, as the goals for each participant would be slightly different during the session. Given the social aspect of karaoke, it could also be seen that engaging in the activity is a better positive outcome than not singing at all. In such a sense, the entertainment of the activity itself, whatever it entails, implicitly makes it more valued - the goal of karaoke is to be entertained. The external aspects could also be seen to influence certain aspects of the outcome. If a karaoke box is rented and a time limit is given, choosing the most backing tracks to play with the least downtime could be seen as a better outcome than playing a few songs within the limit, since it could be seen as getting the most value out of the purchase. However, this may be disliked by some participants as the selection of songs chosen may not be to their liking. Thus, although there may be many variable outcomes and many different values can be assigned to each of them, a consensus of the values of the outcomes cannot be given, making karaoke difficult to classify within this area.

Player Effort

Karaoke relies heavily on player effort to function, as it is a form of interactive entertainment. In a typical karaoke session, participants need to think about the backing tracks to play and invest energy to sing along to the track. Although some aspects can be randomized, such as blindly choosing a song or the participant to sing the song, most are not - a conscious decision and effort needs to be made. Karaoke can therefore be heavily influenced by the actions of the participants.

Attachment of the Player to the Outcome

Juul states that a player naturally tends to feel attached to the outcome if effort is invested into a game. This is somewhat true for karaoke, but the issue of what a "valued outcome" is returns. Yet, it is clear that many people go to karaoke for fun and entertainment, suggesting that a positive outcome is desired from the experience in contrast to not going to karaoke at all. As such, it can be argued that regardless of what participants consider to be a positive outcome in karaoke, each player will invest effort

in achieving such goals. These positive outcomes can be a higher feeling of togetherness in a social environment or relaxation. As a consequence, they would also feel attached to specific aspects of the result. An exception to this could be that a player unwillingly participates in karaoke, and is disinterested in the happenings within. The participant may invest an extremely low player effort, having an unfazed attitude towards the session. It should be noted that if an unwilling participant is forced to invest effort into the outcome and experiences a negative outcome, they may still feel attached to it.

Negotiable Consequences

With so many possible outcomes, the idea of possibly having many different consequences, both real life and optional, is not far behind. For example, an argument between a couple occurring within the karaoke session may lead to a break up at the end, leading to a real life consequence. However, two participants may sing to determine which one has a higher pitch range, which would most likely have a negotiable impact in real life.

Karaoke - Non-game or Borderline Case?

In general, karaoke does not have fixed rules other than the requirement of a microphone and a backing track, distinguishing it from singing. This makes karaoke difficult to categorize as a formal system. However, there is a clear relationship between the activity and the player, as well to the rest of the world. While some may argue that this would put karaoke within the area of borderline cases, Juul puts freeform play outside the set of games specifically due to its lack of rules. Similarly, karaoke can be seen as a type of freeform play - the toys(backing track and microphone) and a play area(karaoke room, stage) is given, but how you play is up to you.

Karaoke as a game

Perhaps the largest indicator that karaoke can be seen as a game is that both have the main goal of entertaining the players. The range of possible outcomes allow players to treat karaoke as a game in multiple ways. A fixed ruleset and different LARP perspectives will be discussed in this report. To describe these perspectives, *Game design patterns*[5], **Sicart game mechanics**[6], and MDA mechanics[7] ((M), (D), or (A)) will be used. Stenros'[8] fader[9] names will be underlined.

Karaoke inspired Games - Fixed Rulesets

It is perhaps no surprise that many games have been inspired by karaoke. Adding clear, fixed rules to karaoke would narrow down and quantify the variable outcomes. This in turn would help apply values to specific outcomes, through a win and lose state, for example. The increasingly lenient technological affordances nowadays also help game designers add more complex rules, granting players a diverse set of rewards, described by Gazzard[10]. Examples of these games include SingStar[11], We Sing[12], and Karaoke Revolution[13]. Many of these games are similar, requiring

players to perform *Rhythm-Based Actions* by **singing** into a special microphone as a *Mimetic Interface* to **match the pitch and rhythm**(M) of the song. As such, *gameplay mastery* is emphasized, specifically to **sing** as faithfully to the original song. This can lead to players practicing(D) or training(D) to reach certain pitches and rhythms deemed correct by the game. Technological limitations in these games affected the accuracy of pitch and rhythm detection. SingStar, for example, did not have speech recognition, allowing players to hum to score points, an *individual reward*. Social interaction is emphasized in these games as well, with some games such as SingStar completely forgoing single player modes. Some of these games had different types of multiplayer modes, which encouraged *cooperation* or *competition*. As a result, much of the emphasis of these games lean towards the players as authors, focusing on emergent storytelling to carry the narrative forward. This could be done through how players sang the songs, or through non-diegetic events. Many of these games contained achievements and trophies too, which help players show evidence of their *Gameplay Mastery*. This would in turn allow players to *brag* about their achievements to others, becoming a *social reward*. *Social rewards* can also occur during a multiplayer session too, where the audience or other players **show appreciation**(D) of their gameplay through applause, achieving a feeling of *togetherness*(A).

It should be noted that the digital games mentioned above only facilitate fixed rules, however. In actual karaoke, players can assign their own fixed rules as well, but would require a judge(s), which can be the players themselves, to determine who wins. The issue is that more complex rules are more difficult to enforce, with more subjectivity.

Karaoke as a LARP

Compared to Juul's definition of games, LARPs have much more freedom, allowing players to embody roles. Karaoke is interesting as a larp such that it can be seen in multiple ways. To begin with, entering the karaoke room can be seen as the magic circle[14], separate from the ordinary - singing in an office setting would be considered strange or awkward(A). It should be understood that an organizer is most likely not explicitly present - this can result in each player having a different perceived frame.

Impact of Frames in Faders

One method to look at Karaoke larp is through the use of frames, introduced by Goffman. Interestingly, unlike an actual larp, much of the context is implicit, and players gradually **learn**(M)(D) the mannerisms, attitudes, and norms of karaoke. This can lead to some players going out of someone else's frame.

Base Frame

It could be argued that the base frame is different for each player, but can still be discussed in the perspective that the physical, mental, and social rules stay close to reality within the magic circle. The Scenography would be a 360-degree illusion, as

everything in the room is taken as face value. A high Bleed-in would occur, as players would tend to take on thin characters that reflect their own personality. The Representation of Theme would also naturally be near identical to reality - the players are playing karaoke in a karaoke room. As a result, it could be argued that player pressure would be hardcore - if alcohol is involved, players would be expected to drink.

Base Frame - Pervasiveness

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this frame is the degree of pervasiveness to the real world, and how they can affect the players in reality. Montola[15] describes pervasive games as “blurring the traditional boundaries of game”. Indeed, karaoke in this sense can be socially pervasive in multiple possibilities. The history of the players can affect the dynamics between players. Some may **be wary** of a certain player, or the dislike of a player can cause others to **avoid** them. This could be seen as a temporal expansion, as the game is influenced by the players’ ordinary lives. With the magic circle being faint, other real life aspects such as social standing and age can also impact how players enact their roles as the spectator or singer - Korean office hierarchies(drinking etiquette, juniors singing first)[16] persist even within karaoke, even though many players take on a thick character mask, drastically altering their personalities within karaoke. Interestingly, since players see other players as mostly as their real life counterparts, players would most likely also attribute the observed character mask of another player to be part of his or her personality, and not as a separate role or character. This is especially true where there is a mix of thin and differentiated characters, making it difficult to distinguish where the frame “edge” is.

There may be *Extra Game Consequences* too. Some players may enter karaoke having ulterior motives, attempting to achieve them in the game. Unexpected events may occur, for example an injury, whose consequences would affect players well after the karaoke, as well as being part of a narrative in reality. This can blur the line between *Diegetic* and *Non-Diegetic Social Consequences*.

Upkeying the Base Frame

While playing as a singer can be an upkey by itself, it is perhaps more interesting to talk about how players can begin to play as more sophisticated characters rather than simply the role of a generic singer. Often, players cite karaoke as being fun because they can experience the fantasy of “being a star”, where “it’s fun to do even if you’re bad”[17]. The role of a star associates ideas of fame, large amounts of cheering, a stage, and “an opportunity to express who they are”, in contrast to a singer. The Communication Style of players would drastically change. Although both the base frame and the upkeyed frame would contain both physical and verbal communication, being on stage would encourage players to physically communicate more. This does not simply mean more movement - sitting on stage, for example, would most likely alter the way the *spectators* **perceive(D)** the player. The idea of **putting on a show(D)** is also likely, where the player would encourage the *spectators* to **sing(M) along**, leading to

higher excitement(A) . They may also put their own flair on the song, rather than faithfully following the song by-the-book.

GNS

There are different understandings of what a “star” is, however. The behaviours above may only be a simulationist’s behaviour, but not what a gamist from the GNS framework[18] would do. A gamist might actually sing faithfully to the song according to the original artist or choose the most popular songs, and a narrativist may choose thematically relevant songs over the session to tell a story.

Those from the “base frame” have perhaps a larger amount of freedom for the players. Since there is a general understanding that the player has to follow the song being played, the gamist may simply try their best, as themselves, to match the pitch, rhythm, and vocals. However, the pervasiveness of reality may affect the goals of the gamist - they may be trying to get someone drunk, to forget about a certain event, or to impress a colleague. The narrativist may pick up on this, and may try to induce events to make their interactions more funny throughout the session. The simulationist may simply act out their daily life, reacting in a manner that conforms to their normal personality.

Social Norms in Karaoke as a LARP

While karaoke can indeed be sung individually, it cannot be denied that karaoke is predominantly a social activity. The different cultures and social norms are not heavily mentioned in the tools presented. Mitsui[4] describes that karaoke inherently is associated with the “noisy atmosphere, obligatory hand-clapping, and enforced singing”, all of which denote a social atmosphere. *Social Roles* appear as a result of this, typically in the form of the singer(s) and the *spectators*. The limited number of microphones enforce these roles, as it limits the amount of singers. The singers’ voices are not only heightened, but the echo further muddles other sounds. The singers can have roles between them too, where one can be the lead singer and the other as the chorus, for example. Similarly, the *spectators* have responsibilities too, where they urge the singers to sing, and cheering them on when they do. Different norms may hint at different behaviours, such as the Korean office hierarchy mentioned above. Younger players may have to take secondary singer roles if need be, and the older spectators may have the privilege of choosing songs for other players. Implicit roles within the *spectators* may exist as well, such as having those of a higher social standing pay for the karaoke session. This can have others offer them to sing first, as a sign of respect or thanks. These *Extra (Pre-)game Consequences* could be seen as what Gazzard calls a social reward, even though players did not necessarily invest much effort into obtaining it.

In conclusion, while karaoke is a non-game from the perspective of the classic game model, adding fixed rules encourages *Gameplay Mastery*, allowing players to accept social rewards. Social rewards can also be obtained if karaoke is played as a larp, but with a feeling of *Togetherness*, without the need of explicit gameplay success.

Different frames and social norms can drastically influence how players behave in karaoke, which could have real life consequences.

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