Freeplay in Videogames

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Dissertation Submitted in Fulfilment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Philosophy

March 2017

Faculty of Society and Design
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ABSTRACT

Freeplay is a creative and often spontaneous act of play, that sees players deviating from the primary objectives of a game and instantiating their own goals, rules, and game modes. From a literary standpoint, freeplay has been observed in children throughout the twentieth century, with many theorists resting upon generic definitions of play in order to conceptualise the phenomenon. This dissertation explores the role of freeplay in the context of videogames; encapsulating a plethora of examples and identifying key characteristics of the phenomenon.

An interpretive phenomenological study was conducted between May and June of 2015, with thirteen players (between the ages of 19 and 34) who were purposively selected to participate in extended interviews designed to gather information about participants’ gameplay and freeplay experiences. Transcriptions of the interviews were then coded and analysed against seven key themes presented throughout the literature including creativity, exploration, immersion, social, spontaneous, structure, and discretion. Freeplay in videogames involves any activity voluntarily engaged in by a player, that is otherwise not a defined objective of the videogame. The genre and degree of openness of the videogame are not crucial factors that determine whether freeplay emerges; rather, freeplay can occur in any videogame in which the player wishes to engage. Freeplay occurs in multiple forms: as a spontaneous discovery of an action that is possible in a game that becomes a short-lived but fun activity, as an intended or additional set of rules designed by the player (or community) to adjust game difficulty and objectives, as an alternative game mode or, as creating different games inside of existing game titles. The phenomenon is often influenced by the actions and accomplishments of other players, with many instances being inspired by players watching videos posted to social media or actions of other players witnessed in game (primarily, multiplayer games).

Freeplay and gameplay present as a duality of play in videogames, with players drifting between defined gameplay objectives of the videogame, and player defined activities. This research reveals that players engage in freeplay in videogames to
prolong their engagement with the videogame, or to prolong their exposure to the state of flow with a particular emphasis on the instances of freeplay being social and spontaneous.

The primary intention of this study was to examine the phenomenon of freeplay as it occurs in the context of videogames by using an interpretive phenomenological approach. As a methodology, phenomenology and small-scale qualitative studies more generally cannot present statistically relevant results. However, the findings presented through many examples in this research justify formalisation of the construct of free play within the context of videogames. Building upon the findings presented here, future studies could deploy a qualitative focus group or quantitative survey as a means for furthering validity expanding meaning extracted from the study.

Keywords: freeplay, videogames, phenomenology, play, games, flow theory.
DECLARATION BY AUTHOR

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

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March 2017
DEDICATION

For Mum.
ETHICS DECLARATION

The research associated with this thesis received ethics approval from the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee. Ethics application number: 15210.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are simply no words that can accurately convey my deepest thanks and gratitude to everyone who has played a role in seeing me complete this dissertation. Whilst I cannot thank everyone individually, there are some very special people whom particularly deserve to have their efforts and support recognised.

I cannot express enough how much I have valued the constant support, guidance and mentorship from my supervisors Dr. Penny de Byl and Dr. Jeffrey Brand. Through all the highs and lows of completing a dissertation, you have been a constant source of encouragement and wisdom since well before commencing this research project. You have been an inspiration, and have given me the faith and confidence in myself to be able to see this research project through. Penny – you are the supervisor, colleague, and friend that I could only hope for. Every day I thank my lucky stars for having had the privilege of knowing you and having you as my supervisor, I am so grateful for your support, mentorship and friendship. You’ve seen me through the brightest and toughest times of this dissertation, and I cannot imagine a world where I could complete this dissertation without your guidance and encouragement. Hopefully now, there will be a few less thesis-freak-outs in your week. Jeff – your knowledge and expertise, supervision and guidance has been invaluable for this research project. What is of more importance to me is your optimism and confidence in seeing me through this project through. Your editorial revisions and comments have been of tremendous help, and I’m extremely grateful of you taking the time to assist with this dissertation. To both of you, thank you! I would also like to thank Bond University for their financial support throughout the dissertation, and for the award of the Vice Chancellors Post Graduate Research Scholarship which made the opportunity to complete this degree possible. I’d also like to acknowledge Dr Damian Cox for his support through the candidature.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Scott Knight, for it was in 2011 during my undergraduate studies that I began exploring this area of freeplay – which I had then tentatively titled ‘limitless play’. It was during that class, and in subsequent
conversations since that I was inspired and encouraged to pursue a higher research degree. I’d also like to thank Deb Smith for some preliminary discussions into the domain of affordance theory, and general support throughout the dissertation.

A special thank you to my editor and transcription assistant, Kayleen Wood, who greatly helped in the process of transcribing 130,000+ words worth of interviews and edited 52,000+ words in the final dissertation. You have been a wonderful support and source of positivity throughout this journey (and if I could afford to supply you with a lifetime supply of Tim Tams in recognition of your hard work, I would).

Above all else, I wouldn’t be here nor able to accomplish what I have without the life-long support, love and sacrifices of my family. To my Mum (Karen), Dad (John) and grandparents (June and Ern), I cannot thank you enough for all you have done. May this dissertation be one of many marks on history that stand testament to my gratitude, appreciation and love.

My friends have shared in every aspect of this journey with me, and it is because of them that I attribute much of the strength and energy needed to see this dissertation and degree through to its end. These are the people I’ve looked to when celebrating an accomplishment or reaching a thesis milestone, or when I’m in crisis-mode and the world felt like it was coming crashing down – you stood by me through it all, and I cannot thank you all enough. To Thomas and the Bevans family (Ann, Graeme, Emily and Chloe), you’ve seen me through this dissertation from the start through to its end. Your support and encouragement has been so deeply appreciated. Alex Hart, you started out as my personal trainer, but quickly became a very close friend – not only have you helped me transform my body, but early morning boxing does wonders to clear the mind and destress! Christopher Kearney, Ellysha Mill, Adrienne Davis (and family), Thomas Coghlan, Jona Stevens, Chantal McNaught, and Natasha Douglas, you’ve all been my rock throughout this entire journey – each of you has kept me strong and empowered to reach the end, but somehow you knew exactly when to distract me and help recharge the batteries. You’ve put up with me
through it all, which itself deserves some form of award or something, but a shout
out here will have to do for now! Thank you!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my external confirmation of candidature
reviewer Associate Professor Daniel Johnson for his valuable feedback and
guidance on the project. I would also like to thank each of the participants in this
study; for giving their time and being so willing to participate in this study. Further, I
would like to thank the reviewers and examiners of this dissertation for their time
and involvement.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank you (the reader). May you find
some merit or value in reading this dissertation. Perhaps you’ll be a passionate
gamer interested in freplay, or you’ll be a research student seeking to find a
possible guide to the structure of a dissertation such as this, or you’ll be someone
I’ve guilt tripped into reading it! Regardless, your time and interest in my work is
appreciated and I thank you.
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ABBREVIATIONS

- PVP – Player vs Player
- RPG – Role Playing Game
- FPS – First Person Shooter
- MOBA – Massively Online Battle Arena
- MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game
- IPA - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
PUBLICATIONS

PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS RESEARCH:


OTHER RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS (PRIOR TO SEPTEMBER 2016):


