

Flow, Seduction and Mutual Pleasures

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses the theories of flow by Csikzentmihalyi and seduction by Baudrillard in relation to player experience in multi-user games. It tests the theories loosely against player statements related to the pleasures of multi-player games. The aim of the article is to tentatively explore two seemingly opposing theories which have both been used to explain the attraction of gaming, and to uncover whether they are mutually exclusive, ready for peaceful cohabitation or if they really say the same thing.

Author Keywords

Flow, Seduction, MUD, Players

FLOW, SEDUCTION AND MUTUAL PLEASURES

Over the last years Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi's theory of happiness (1990, 2002) has emerged into a position of almost paradigmatic power in game studies. His work on happiness and pleasure promotes happiness as an achievement, a sum of mastery, challenge and control, either in games of the body or the mind. The state of flow is a factor of change and control, but most of all it is a factor of the human will for self-improvement. Happiness, in Csikzentmihalyi's version, is a result of hard work, discipline and a continuous battle for self-improvement.

As an alternative to this self-made view of happiness we find the theories of games as immersive, subversive and chaotic, a seductive force of liminal pleasure. I see this for instance in Ragnhild Tronstad's (2004) use of Jean Baudrillard's (1990) *Seduction*. Baudrillard holds seduction up as opposing production (1990:84), and claims that play is debased to function through play-therapy, play school, play-as-catharsis and play-as-creativity (1990:158).

These two theories of pleasure appear to be not just alternatives, they appear mutually exclusive, and through this mutual exclusion represent and create the very tension which Johan Huizinga proscribes for play. Pitching Baudrillard against Csikzentmihalyi, as I intend to do in this paper, is very much a game, one that both introduces the delight of flow through mastery, but also seduces me into the subversive universe of Baudrillard's arguments.

Mutual pleasure: players on multiplayer fun

Online text-based multi-user computer games are mainly driven by the intercourse of the players. The pleasure is derived from a gaming environment that permits personal influence, social interaction and development in relation to other players, not just in relation to the game. In a study of MUD culture, game texts and player interaction, a number of players were interviewed about their playing pleasure, and which of the different aspects of playing



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that were more important to their playing pleasure. The answers indicated that gaming online contains the same elements as all other kinds of play, from the social element of group spirit and cooperation to the challenge of beating the game itself.

Elisabeth Sierro (Mortensen 2003: attachment 7) is a long time MUD player, a builder and an administrator of games. In an interview in Portland in 1999, she describes her pleasure of playing and building games as a pleasure of social interaction and mutual exploration, the pleasure of having others to play with rather than against:

ES: And for me it's a very selfish thing, for me it's actually – I want to have a place where other people can come and play with me. I love the role-playing, I love having my characters and I love being able to engage something creatively at such a complex level. And I want to have an environment in which I can do that. And so I guess it's for me it really is creating a space in which the story exists and the story is creative, and in which all the dynamics of all the other players and all imms and everyone is sort of working together in a manner that best benefits everybody. Because that's the environment I want to be in and I want to play in. I mean... it's not really altruistic at all.

Elisabeth's reply is a productive one. She plays because it is a way to develop herself and show off her skill as a player and builder before other people. The experience of playing is very *enjoyable* to her, which according to Csikzentmihalyi goes beyond the simpler delights of pleasure:

When people ponder further about what makes their lives rewarding, they tend to move beyond pleasant memories and begin to remember other events, other

experiences that overlap with pleasurable ones but fall into a category that deserves a separate name: *enjoyment*. Enjoyable events occur when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or desire but also gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before.

Enjoyment is characterised by this forward movement, by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment (2002:46).

Dawn Marks (Mortensen 2003:attachment 8) also seeks out the game for social reasons, but she does not really care so much about the game as about the connection it gives her with others.

DM: I have a stake in it. It's got interactions, and there are people who are on the games I am playing now that I have been playing with for two or three years, not even on Dragon Realms, there are people who followed me to Dragon Realms so.... And you know, after that long you get to know the person to some degree and you have things in common outside the game, so it's nice to catch up, yeah...

Dawn does not really express any strong emotion or refers to playing as an activity that makes her happy. It is more enjoyable, more along the lines of activities involving common goals and activities (Csikzentmihalyi 1990:186). She does however underline her involvement and the importance of the game by claiming that she has a stake in it. Benjamin Danner (Mortensen 2003:attachment 11), another Dragon Realms player, has a larger stake, a deeper involvement and more of a flow experience from his playing.

BD: Because you get sucked in and then it's like, you're always playing. One thing I have compared it to is like it's this coffee-

shop you go to? And it's always someone there and someone you can talk to. So you can always go there and hang out. So if you ever want social interaction to some degree, you can always go there and hang out and like: talk to people. Although it's a kind of weird social interaction because you're not actually seeing people. Very limited. But... at a certain point, you can get to be expressive, even though it's only text. There's also the thing of a little bit of competitiveness. So the more hours you spend online, the stronger your character gets. So you want to spend more time, so you can get stronger, so you can pass up this other person who's been annoying you, beat them up, that kind of thing. That never works. Because there's always someone who can spend more time online than you, that's more annoying than you.

Csikszentmihalyi's ideal social flow experience is one of production and discipline. Chris, the young man who changes his lonely life into one of high-school popularity does so with the flair of a good player:

In other words, he transformed the daunting, vague monster of popularity into a feasible flow activity that he ended up enjoying while it gave him a sense of pride and self-esteem. The company of peers, like every other activity, can be experienced at various levels: at the lowest level of complexity it is a pleasurable way to ward off chaos temporarily; at the highest it provides a strong sense of enjoyment and growth (1990:187).

Benjamin was a clan leader in Dragon Realms, which means he held a position of both formal and social power. The clans were important role-play devices as well as social groups, and to lead one meant you had to play the game well at several different levels, and denoted

achievement and mastery, a perfect position for a flow experience in a social game.

Another player who was looking for and also experienced a flow experience through challenge and mastery, but who got frustrated as the MUD Dragon Realms was too rigidly administrated for him, was Beyne Peterson (Mortensen 2003:attachment 12). While having made a definite impression on the players and created a name for himself that echoed in the game long after he had left, Beyne examined his playing experience carefully in the interview:

BP: But people are looking for that in MUDs (intellectual challenge), because people are complaining bitterly about the lack of intelligence in and the depth in mobile action and the NPC's don't play character actions. So people looking for the same thing that I am, in muds in the intellectual aspect too. They do look for intellectual challenge and puzzle and things, they do look for that in a Mud, that's one of the things that's cool about a MUD it has multiple games in one. It's buying lots and lots of software at the same time. But... consistently, always, the biggest complaint as we drag them down, is how much fun they are having is – human interaction.

I stopped playing DR before DR shut down, not because the plot was thin, everyone knew the plot was thin, people were making it up as it went along. And not because I hated the systems, because the systems were appalling, they had nothing to do with reality and had a horrible game-effect, I mean – my skills don't matter but my equipment does, and the fact that I wear this helmet makes me a better fighter than the fact that I have been fighting for 20 years. That's an important thing, but we can ignore those things and

role-play past them. What made me stop playing, makes a lot of people stop playing before the server actually goes down, is the lack of social involvement, there was just not anybody on that I wanted to play with. I had a ball in the middle of the street and I just didn't want to play with anybody there. So I just took it home and bounced it a few times and put it in the corner, you know. And that's the thing.

Beyne's perfect game was, despite his disillusionment with Dragon Realms, the game where he had invested much emotion and creative energy, still a MUD. His perfect MUD was however to be one of much more social interaction, of playing with other people.

This fits awkwardly into the pattern of Csikzentmihalyi's steps towards happiness. Beyne does not really have a flow experience. The flow experience, which is described as the optimal experience or the autotelic experience, is one of achievement, not interaction, an achievement that is rewarding in itself, not through the rewards from others (Csikzentmihalyi 2002:67):

The term *autotelic* derives from two Greek words, *auto* meaning self and *telos* meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward. Most of the players quoted above had some ulterior motive for their playing, and indulged in an experience which was autotelic in varying degrees. Elisabeth and Benjamin were perhaps after all the most autotelic players. Elisabeth built because she loved playing, and played for the sheer delight of it. Benjamin enjoyed his position as a central player with responsibility for the others about him, and played to optimise the experience of playing both for himself and others. In both cases playing was the goal. For Dawn and Beyne playing was a means

towards different goals. Dawn just wanted to interact with other people, to hang out, and the game was secondary to the social aspect of playing. Beyne wanted the intellectual challenge, and the game was a way for him to interact and measure his own skill against that of others, role-play wise and technically.

We could stop there and describe their pleasure through this productive, disciplined model. But some of the words the players choose to describe their experience does not fit with a self-contained happiness, or one of rational choices and personal mastery. If we look at the most "pure" flow description, that of Benjamin, he speaks not only about his social circle, but also about "being sucked in" by the game. The game exerts some kind of force on him, and he gives in to it, is seduced.

For us, only those who can no longer produce are dead. In reality, only those who do not wish to seduce or be seduced are dead. But seduction gets hold of them nonetheless, just as it gets hold of all production and ends up destroying it. (Baudrillard 1990:84).

Tronstad describes how this works not in the social context, but in the context of the quest, as she describes the quest element as a seductive one. She starts at the etymology of seduction: *se-ducere*, diverting from your path (Tronstad 2004:157), and shows how the quest is seductive while it is unresolved (2004:160). Solving the quest is production, the opposite of seductive practice.

The social aspect of MUDs insures that the quest of playing can really never be solved. Through the interaction of other players the story keeps changing and new elements are constantly added. It was the lack of the seduction of mutual play that made Beyne bounce his ball a couple of times and then take it home, while it was the presence of others

and the transgression of the Law through human imagination and diversity that made Elisabeth and Benjamin, and even Dawn, return.

The challenge of the game

Studying MUDs has revealed some of the basic pleasures of gaming. The simple, low-bandwidth text form combined with the many opportunities for in-game communication between players offers some of the basic pleasures of playing. MUDs are also to a large degree amateur efforts, created by enthusiasts who do it for the sake of creating a place to play and to have fun. This makes them more autotelic from the programming phase to the act of playing. The scope of this paper is however to look at the player side of the experience of pleasure, enjoyment or even happiness in playing.

In order to achieve a flow experience, the player needs to be skilled enough to get somewhere in the game, but the game needs to have a certain challenge to offer the player. One way to offer challenge is by creating conflict and competition. Benjamin Danner muses over the pleasures of competition and the challenges of playing:

BD: I don't know if the competition is attractive, but it definitely makes you want to spend more hours online. It's part of the addictive nature of it all.

BD: The role-play was fun, depending on what the role-playing was. And I liked being a part of things as opposed to just purely hack'n'slash. Where there's actually like your character has a concept of what they are and it fits into that world, and you can be a part of that world, and still not get too far behind. Because if you go on to like other MUDs where everybody are like killing things, then it's like: what's your character? Kill things! So you have to

make your character something that would go out in hunting groups and kill everything that is the right level to gain experience points. You know. So I was able to for Souman to kill fish: look, it's fish, kill it. So I couldn't eat it but yeah, that's OK. Yeah, I mean... role-playing experiences on there were fun, the big meetings, you know, to see everyone kind of try to do their best at doing things... their emotes...

Hack'n'slash is the purely score-based achievement strategy, where the player gathers points to improve strength and skill of the character through gathering experience points. Role-play rarely gains players experience points, but social status, and makes them part of something larger, an unfolding ever-changing mutual fantasy. Hack'n'slash is a way of playing that suits the flow experience. It offers quick rewards and a progressive scale of challenge and mastery. Csikzentmihalyi's model of "why the complexity of consciousness increases as a result of flow experiences" is described as a simple diagram where the flow channel is balanced between challenges and skills. On either side of the flow channel boredom and anxiety lurks (Csikzentmihalyi 2002:74). This is a pretty good description of how progression in the hack'n'slash part of MUDs is designed.

Role-play is not easily pinpointed like this. It is too dependent on interaction and the response of others to create such a simple model. While being skilled at hack'n'slash in Dragon Realms was something a player could achieve and enjoy alone or one-on-one in player killing situations, being a skilled role-player dependent less on your own skill and more on the group. Beyne Peterson wanted to master this skill, but from a technical view, as he was striving to understand what was correct, how things ought to be constructed and what should lead to rewards.

BP: OK, the background is I made a character I called Brizzial of the ancient Fang. Dragon Realms had – I know you know all this, but for the sake of the microphone: Dragon Realms has a race called the serpent folk, known to themselves as the Xersians, and they have their own language: Xersian. This is a race that conceptually, in the one paragraph it is given on the entire MUD, for its world-background was a really powerful race a long time ago, bigger than any other race. It fell into complete and utter decadence, and I do mean decadence, became basically nasty and slovenly, and their entire empire crumbled. They seemed to have had a monolithic empire which completely fell apart, and now they are a slave-race, to another race of really bad people called the drow, dark elves. Ahhh – the character concept was revolutionary, which was actually fitting into the world background, no breaks there (...) What was bigger, and bigger than my character, was trying to make one of the races on dragon Realms something more than a paragraph.

Beyne's idea of good role-play is to create a coherent background and generate as much information as possible about how the character should be played. Through extensive help-files the insecurity of the play could be reduced and it would be easier to play "correctly", as the descriptions of the background would help create a standard to judge the role-play. The administrators of Dragon Realms opposed this. In an interview years after Dragon Realms was closed (in Melbourne May 2003), the Dragon Realms administrators Topaz, Elwyn and Scarabae described the randomness of the development of what Beyne describes as an extremely thin storyline. They would go from one good idea to the next, incorporating the suggestions of players, using their various more or less good

and fanciful creations in the development of the game. In this manner they created a flexible and surprising gaming environment rather than a rigid and strict one.

Beyne's ideal of an ordered game-universe where he could check if his role-play was right or wrong (and so measure his mastery of the game) came into conflict with the administrators' view of the emerging and flexible nature of a mutually created world and story line. Where Beyne's ideal of an optimal experience would fit neatly into the description by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, Topaz, Elwyn and Scarabae had other ideals: the seductive, non-productive and subversive ideal of Baudrillard's understanding of seduction. Where Beyne desires *the Law*, Topaz, the main generator of the storyline of DR, follows *the Rule*.

Baudrillard distinguishes between the Law and the Rule, claiming them as oppositions:

Ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of a prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. *However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule* (Baudrillard 1990:131).

Beyne wanted the finite lawfulness of reality, while Topaz created rules. "The endless, reversible cycle of the Rule is opposed to the linear, finalised progression of the Law (Baudrillard 1990:132)." To keep the game running it needed to be flexible and open to adjustment, and the alterations Topaz made to the structures governing the game were all alterations of the Rule. It was not until the end that Topaz activated the Law. The Law was the underlying story, the battle beyond the control of the players. Godlike being fought

godlike being until darkness won and horror ruled the world, and this was the note on which the game was closed to the players.

But this meant that the play had to be kept frustratingly in the world of seduction in order to continue. The rules needed to be adjustable, and not absolute, and the insecurity inherent in seduction opposes the mastery and control necessary for the experience of flow.

Flow and seduction: the attraction of the game

Torill: Why do you do this, why do you play these games?

TK: Inspiration? It is one of the biggest and most important things in my life, it's almost a spiritual element in my life? It's the reason – why one of the things I really like to do is – checking out a volume of science fiction stories and start reading them through, and then thinking about each one after I read it, and then just go WOW, that's such a great idea, that's such a cool idea, or just an amazing idea. H.G.Wells, science fiction author, said that civilisation is a race between civilisation and catastrophe, and that's one of my favourite quotes of all time, because I am an educator and I am a game maker and a game player, and I read science fiction, and it all sort of comes together in the that idea of the tension between the brilliance that leads to destructive technology and the brilliance that leads to inspirational and educational technology – we get movies teaching us lessons, we get stories teaching us lessons. George Lucas studied mythology in college that was like this big thing, and he wanted to make a modern mythology, so he came up with this idea of the force, this supernatural power that could be used for good or evil. It all came back to human agency, not Zevs sitting on the temple Olympus tempting mortals, but it was a human choice what we do with a power like

the force. We don't have the force, that I know of, but we do have power, we have genetic engineering, we have nuclear power, we have utterly destroyed our eco-system and we have certainly demonstrated the potential to destroy species. To drive species to extinction, for instance, is something that I think generations from now, human beings (if we survive), will look back and just go "WOW did we really so casually eliminate pieces of an ecosystem like that."

Tom Kentley (Mortensen 2003, attachment 5) was perhaps both the most autotelic player interviewed as well as the most productive and functional one. Playing was close to a spiritual experience for him, a philosophy, a way to understand life and a tool to explain the mechanisms of society to others. His intensity and deep commitment to the games he played and created was based on a fascination with the contrast between order and chaos inherent in human nature.

Games, he felt, would let him understand the human exercise of power, and enable the players in their quest for control over their lives, for agency. This control would however not be a rigid control or an absolute mastery, but the ability to influence others in return for being influenced: seduction and re-seduction, mutual interplay which in itself would be pleasurable. Baudrillard describes this functionalistic activity as *ludic* rather than playful:

Obviously, the ludic cannot be equated with having fun. With its propensity for making connections, the ludic is more akin to detective work. More generally, it connotes networks and their mode of functioning, the forms of their permeation and manipulation. The ludic encompasses all the different ways one can "play" with networks, not in order to establish

alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning (Baudrillard 1990:158).

Through the ludic, Baudrillard finds that play is no longer fun. It has become functional. The final chapter of seduction is a sharp warning, or a sad summary, depending on the state of mind of the reader. In this chapter seduction suddenly merges with the idea of flow.

Csikzentmihalyi proposes flow as a way for the individual to shape the quality of life. It is a recipe for happiness. Through many little exercises the individual is to become happier and enhance their experience. This example from the chapter on “The body in flow” describes how the body can be developed into a vessel for enjoyment:

Everything the body can do is potentially enjoyable. Yet many people ignore this capacity, and use their physical equipment as little as possible, leaving its ability to provide flow unexploited. When left undeveloped, the senses give us chaotic information: an untrained body moves in random and clumsy ways, an insensitive eye presents ugly or uninteresting sights, the unmusical ear mainly hears jarring noises, the coarse palate knows only insipid tastes. If the functions of the body are left to atrophy, the quality of life becomes merely adequate, and for some even dismal. But if one takes control of what the body can do, and learns to impose order on physical sensations, entropy yields to a sense of enjoyable harmony in consciousness (Csikzentmihalyi 2002:95)

This is a view that fits with the self-made man, the individual who through hard work shapes his or her own happiness. It ignores the structures of society and their power to influence the quality of life. Quality of life, happiness, becomes relative and a matter of perception.

If we keep measuring the pleasure of computer games by this functionalistic measuring stick, we will play into a view of the ludic, play as function, aimed not at chaotic experience, but at productive goals. The dark side of gaming is less the potential for learning about violence or even social isolation for the individual player, but a society where delight is used to reach goals, a world where the autotelic experience itself will be totally missing in the productive use of the flow experience. And Baudrillard’s dystopic description fits flow turned to strategic use: “The world is no longer driven by power, but by fascination, no longer by production, but seduction. This seduction is, however, no more than an empty declaration formed of simulated concepts. (1990:174)”

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