

Playing the Interface

A Case Study of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

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ABSTRACT

Video games are currently not well understood from an HCI perspective. As opposed to the standard task-based view of interaction, video game interaction takes the form of *play*. In this paper we offer an analysis of a form of gameplay we call “playing the interface.” By understanding play as a kind of interaction with software, we can move toward a video game-specific HCI.

Author Keywords

Video game, play, user interface

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Video games are one of the most culturally important form of computer software today. At present, however, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research has been limited in its consideration of them. The central reason for this is that video games differ substantially from the traditional focus of HCI: players do not “use” video games, they *play* them. In a very real sense, the “task” in video game play is the learning and exploration of the user interface itself.

In this paper we present a study of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), the latest installment in the infamous action-adventure series. We focus on qualitative data collected from both observation sessions and interviews with players of the game. An important theme in our data analysis has been players’ interest in playing specifically with the *user interface* of the game, as opposed to traditional views of gameplay as focusing on game worlds or narratives. We present an analysis of this form of playing with the control system and interactive possibilities as an example of how an HCI approach to video games might be conducted.

BACKGROUND

More than two decades ago, Thomas Malone (1980) studied video games from an HCI perspective, considering them as a potential tool for learning. Despite this early interest, video game HCI has proceeded slowly.

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Most contemporary work does not proceed far beyond the claim that video games require different approaches (Jørgensen, 2004), though there are exceptions. Pagulayan et al. (2003), for example, present an extensive discussion of their methods for improving the usability of video games from a game-centric perspective. Not only in terms of usability, but much more generally, video games must be treated in a different manner to traditional HCI research (Barr et al., in press).

The key to this is in the nature of interaction with video games: play. The area known as “game studies” has begun to provide substantial research in the area of video games and play. Stemming from early work on play such as Johan Huizinga’s (1950) *Homo Ludens*, the area of “game studies” examines video games from a number of perspectives, from the ethnography to rule systems. Jesper Juul’s (2006) new book *Half-Real*, for example, addresses video games as both rule-systems and fictions, helping to bridge between the formal elements of games and their representations as virtual worlds. Nick Yee’s extensive *Daedalus Project* focuses on players’ motivations in gameplay (Yee, 2006). Although links between game studies and HCI are fairly limited, there is relevant work, such as the above, which can be useful in considering interaction with video games as software.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data presented in this paper are players’ experiences and interpretations of play. We recruited five experienced and typical players. Each played *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for an hour while “thinking aloud.” After the observation sessions we interviewed each player for a further forty minutes. The two approaches are complementary, with the observations providing a view of actual gameplay and the interviews presenting a more reflective account of the experience. The audio from the think-aloud process and the interviews was transcribed.

Following a typical qualitative data analysis procedure, we assigned codes to chunks of text, associating a descriptive concept or phrase (Denzin, 2003). In the analysis relevant to the present work, we focused on concepts related to the user interface and interaction, such as “awareness of game as software” and “exploring possibilities.” These initial codes were examined for patterns and organised into larger-scale thematic areas during another pass through the data. The themes and categories developed in this way allow us to discuss interaction with the user interface using the rich descriptions from players themselves.

RESULTS

Our analysis of the data from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* uncovered several thematic areas relating to the activity of “playing the interface,” which we will discuss here. The key concept running throughout is that playing the interface is an essential part of the gameplay, and is not a specialist activity at all. In all cases we support our discussion with the words of the players themselves.

How to Play the Interface

The traditional view of gameplay is of a highly structured activity with game-defined goals. A basic characterization of “playing the interface” is that players play specifically with the user interface itself. That is, they experiment with the interactive possibilities, from the buttons on the controller to complex activities. One player summarized these two kinds of interaction well:

You want to see the different parts of the world, the different characters, all the different cut-scenes. See where it goes. And drive, fly, whatever, all the vehicles. See what the different controls are, the different physics properties each things has... (Participant 3)

A key aim of play is to experience everything in terms of the interface. Playing the interface might mean exploring the various possibilities in the appearance of the avatar: “I've known a lot of people to spend a serious amount of time building up their character's attributes. Spending ages dressing themselves up and stuff.” (Participant 3). It might mean understanding the possibilities represented by the vehicles in the game: “[This truck is] not particularly entertaining to play with, unless you have a small enclosed area in which to play with it. Cities are good places for these [trucks], off-road is not” (Participant 5).

The key to playing the interface, however, is in the exploration of the action possibilities. This activity includes the straightforward learning of each possible action at the beginning of the game, “learning by doing”: “Throwing a grenade. Yep, just testing it works... [grenade blows up a number of gang members]. Yeah, it works” (Participant 4). What we see here is players *learning* an interface through play, often by pressing buttons to see what they do in various contexts, for instance.

Beyond individual controls, players look to combine the possible actions into complex activities which explore the interface more deeply:

It's like, I want to run for ages because I'm chasing down a guy with a nice vehicle so I can go and jump it off the top of Mount Chilead. It's a summation of small parts. (Participant 5)

Playing the interface means understanding not just the available operations, but the possibilities for *activity* within the constraints of the interface. An interesting element of this kind of play is that it leads to a fragmented-looking experience, though the players themselves do not necessarily experience this. Because there are constantly new interactive opportunities

presented (a car to steal, a house to burgle), players shift focus often, sometimes choosing new goals every minute:

[Crashes into a pink car] Now *that* is nice. I have to have that. [He steals the car.] This thing is brilliant. It doesn't handle too well, but that's the price of a classic I guess [laughing]. That was worth it, definitely. (Participant 2)

In fact, this constantly changing play sometimes *does* cause irritation to the players, who can feel overwhelmed by the possibilities. At times makes them feel as though they are not really able to play the game in the traditional sense, by performing the game-defined goals:

You saw when I was playing. I was changing my mind all the time... you know, always changing... never really getting down to missions... (Participant 1)

Ultimately, playing the interface is about finding the limits of the game and what can be done with it.

It's also to see where the limits actually lie. Like, okay, this is the physical limit. Can't do anything beyond this. I've tried, I've tried, no, you can't get a cement truck up that hill. Just won't happen. (Participant 5)

The Motivating Interface

One motivational refrain for players concerned the more structural elements of the game, the narrative: “I wanted to know what would happen, what would come next, what they had in store for me after that. And so I wanted to do the mission” (Participant 2). More important than this, though, was the drive for players to understand the “meaning” of every possible action: “if I have the option of buying a house then I should buy a house. Because I don't know what buying that house is going to mean for me after I've bought it” (Participant 2). The driving force of playing with the user interface was always to “see what happens,” as we also saw in the previous section.

The major way this was phrased by participants was the appeal of *novelty*: Novelty was cast as the central rewarding feature of play:

Basically, unlocking something, or getting something to a point which is above a point it was at previously. Or having met a new person... found a new weapon... unlocked a new area, or just broken the game. (Participant 5)

In fact, the motive was not only to “see new things” but to see, if possible, *everything*: “maxing out the game... and basically getting complete and utter enjoyment. Doing everything possible in the game is maximising your investment” (Participant 5).

When they occasionally tried to analyse this motivation more closely, players felt it was essentially human nature:

It's just like this natural human instinct for me. It's like those Advent calendars... if you can break something off and see what's behind it, you will, you won't not do that. If you can open something you'll open it. (Participant 3)

A further interesting element of this drive to see everything was that it could sometimes reduce motivation. Players grew weary of the vast size of the game and its huge numbers of interactive possibilities:

It's a game that has a hell of a lot of things you can do in it. But I find it's just a bit too much. (Participant 1)

In this case the game crosses the border between play and work, becoming a chore rather than an enjoyable experience. What is intriguing, however, is that players often fight through these unmotivated periods of play because the lure of doing new things and exhausting the interface is so great:

I put the game in and I had a go at it, and I just found myself driving around like a zombie. It was weird. And I was like: What am I doing? I'm not actually doing anything here. It was totally bizarre. (Participant 2)

Ultimately, players play the interface because they want to be sure they have done everything, seen everything, and experienced all the potential of the game. That is the fun of playing games of this nature. In fact, this style of play is acknowledged by the game itself, which goes so far as to offer a “percentage complete” statistic, relating to how many of the broad range of activities have been attempted and completed:

Total progress made: 27.81 percent. The overall goal in this game, above all else, is to get that barrier, to get that value up to 100 percent, because everything else in the game is associated with it. (Participant 5)

Playing Software

Not only do players “play the interface” implicitly, in that they explore the possibilities of a game world which is defined by a user interface, but they show a frequent awareness of the game specifically as software. This leads them to further be aware of their playing the interface at a conscious level: “It's about exploring the game and indulging in the things that were created for me to indulge in” (Participant 2). The knowledge that the game is software, designed to be played with, is often used as the core reasoning for trying to do everything.

An important element of players' awareness of the game as designed software was their knowledge surrounding the structure of gameplay. Players often treated the obligatory missions in the game as simply standing in the way of their freedom to try new things in the game world. They saw a level of irony in this process of doing what you are told in order to gain freedom: “you get these roadblocks in the game which is doing the same thing over and over again trying to do it... so that you can do anything you want” (Participant 3). Nonetheless, players also acknowledged the necessity of the more structural elements of the game, as they give meaning to those times when players are not engaged in missions:

On the one hand it gives you a totally free interface where you can jump into any car, you

can run, you can swim, you can bike ride, you can buy food, you can dress your character up. But, on the other hand, you can't go everywhere, and you can't do everything. So you need either status in the game world, or you need to figure out tricks and skills to get around those restrictions. (Participant 3)

In other words, the tension between the structure and constraints of the game design and the freedom of the user interface is a large part of what creates the pleasure of gameplay.

Players are conscious of a specific designer of the game, creating a world (and interface) for them to interact with. Sometimes, play with the interface becomes a form of communication from player to designer, either implicitly:

I'm going to see if the petrol station will explode... [throws a grenade into the station]. Yep, so it turns out the petrol station does catch on fire ... just wanted to see how well they've done the game. (Participant 4)

Or as a completely explicit activity in and of itself:

I do stuff to mess with the people who made it. Like: Hey guys, I did everything, and give me more please. Or: Hey guys, this shouldn't happen, I broke it... (Participant 5)

As we see here, for some players the interface is something to be broken. This is taking the activity of finding the “limits” of the interface to an extreme. Here the player explicitly treats the game as software in order to experience it most fully: only by revealing the game's nature as software and its corresponding limitations and even bugs can it be considered complete:

It's a completion that goes beyond having finished all the missions, or having gotten all the points. It's a completion where you've basically broken the game... you've done something you were not meant to be able to do. (Participant 5)

Experience and Outcomes

The final area of playing the interface we wish to address concerns the experience a player has in playing this way, and the general outcomes of that type of play. We have already seen the broad outcomes, such as a feeling of “true” completion of the game, for instance, but there are smaller scale outcomes also.

An interesting element of the experience of playing the interface is that players are not only *motivated* to try the available commands, but they use the game's nature as software to justify their actions when they might be morally questionable:

There's a continuum in that you could actually deliberately try to kill people in the game, and take that as far as you want, and it's kind of like people would explore the different possibilities of action. And see what happens to them. (Participant 3)

An import outcome connected to the activity of playing the interface is learning about the game in a very detailed and complete manner. Beyond simply understanding the narrative arc, players often emerge from play with a comprehensive understanding of how the game *works* both at the level of successful gameplay, but, perhaps more importantly, at the level of the game as interface:

It lets you know if you can launch cars across the map... lets you know what you *could* do in a mission in terms of extreme driving ... it just lets you know how small the adjustments have to be, or lets you know the handling of each individual car. And that comes in handy when you do wish to complete missions. ... It is learning skills, and it's also just learning how to ... how each variable in the game functions. (Participant 5)

Ultimately, of course, the desired outcome of gameplay is *fun*. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the activity of playing the interface is a crucial element of fun in the gameplay of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. In fact, at times it appeared that this freedom to explore the interactive possibilities far outweighed the enjoyment of the structural elements of the missions. The desire to explore the world of the game was so overwhelming that it could cause players to “fight” for fun:

Since it's a game, you want to have fun. If you know that you're not having fun there's not really reason to play it. Unless you want to keep seeing things ... there's still a compulsion to keep seeing more... so it kind of carries you along in different ways. (Participant 3)

Modern games such as *Grand Theft Auto* challenge traditional notions of gameplay by de-emphasising structural elements in favour of exploration. Of central importance to this exploration is playing the interface. This kind of gameplay is, in many ways, the new fun:

It's all about how you measure fun. Can you measure fun? I think this game asks that question constantly. (Participant 3)

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have seen that players of the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* devote a considerable amount of effort to what we have called “playing the interface.” That is, players direct their attention quite specifically to exploring the interactive possibilities of the game as a user interface. We have shown, through the presentation of qualitative data, what kinds of play this results in, the motivations for this activity, the players’ specific awareness of the game as software, and some of the particular outcomes of the activity.

Although we feel confident that this activity is not limited to *Grand Theft Auto* specifically, because of our other

research, it certainly remains to investigate the activity both in more depth and in a variety of other games, specifically varying genres to examine that effect.

Furthermore, while playing the interface is an interesting and important component of the HCI of play in video games, there is an enormous amount of work remaining to establish video game HCI as a workable area of research, focusing particularly around our ability to describe play as a form of human-computer interaction. This work represents an attempt to contribute to that larger project.

As we stated early, games are often thought of as highly rule-driven, with players largely following the instructions of the game in order to play. In this paper we have shown how players also play video games as *interfaces*. They are motivated to play in this way most often because they want to see everything a game has to offer, and this motivation yields a quite specific form of interaction in the form of experimentation and exploration: playing the interface.

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