Methodological Considerations in the Study of Tandem Play

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Abstract

This paper presents a detailed discussion of the research methods used in the first part of our ongoing study into "tandem play," which we have defined as "two or more players engag[ing] with a single-player game together, moving through the game with a variety of potential motives." Tandem play can take many forms, but the emphasis is on a collaborative, shared experience. Although tandem play has always been a part of video games, our research into it is the first, and so we had to design our study from the ground-up. In this paper we discuss four aspects of the study—the choice of game that subjects would play, recruitment strategy, our roles as researchers, and the effects of limited play time on the study—and how these decisions impacted our results.

Author Keywords

Tandem play; methods; couch co-op; Twitch streaming

Introduction

How do people play and enjoy single-player video games collaboratively, or with an audience? How does the presence of others affect how people play? These questions form the basis of our ongoing study into "tandem play," which we have defined elsewhere as "two or more players engag[ing] with a single-player game together, moving through the game with a variety of potential motives" (Consalvo, M., Begy, J., Ganzon, S. C., Scully-Blaker, R., 2016). Tandem play can take many forms, but is always a collaborative, shared experience. This type of play has so far gone largely unexamined, despite calls from researchers to investigate more than simply "the person sitting at the keyboard or with hands on the console controller" and to focus also on "people sitting alongside on the sofa or someone with a chair pulled up next to the player, all watching the action on the screen, sometimes (but not always) waiting to take their own turn but just as often playing-over-the-shoulder or giving tips" (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010).

Yet studying such phenomena, where play is perhaps performed differently from expected norms, demands novel studies, which then must entail an in-depth consideration of the methods used. In this paper we discuss the methodological decisions made as we planned and conducted this study over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year, and discuss how these decisions affected our results. We specifically address four aspects of our study: the choice of game, recruitment strategy, our roles as researchers, and the effects of subjects having limited play time.

Of course, the idea that methods influence results is neither surprising nor novel. Our hope in discussing our methods in detail is that this will be a useful resource for scholars doing qualitative game studies research generally. Most detailed methodological discussions in game studies concern MMOG studies, which is to be expected given that subfield's connections to anthropology and sociology, where methodological questions are routinely foregrounded. There are far fewer methodological discussions of qualitative lab-based studies in game studies, which is part of the motivation for this paper. Additionally, we also hope that this paper will be a useful resource for further studies into tandem play.

Our study divided subjects into two groups, both of which played *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (*DAI)* (Bioware, 2014) over three ninety-minute sessions in a casual setting at Concordia University's mLab. Group assignments were based on indicated preference. Group A consisted of five pairs of subjects (ten subjects total) who played the Xbox One version together on a couch in the lab. All in-game decisions were made cooperatively by the subject-pairs, who also decided when and if to pass the controller between them. They were told to play however they liked, and to do whatever they wanted to in the game. Meanwhile, researchers sat off to the sides of the couch (also facing the TV) to observe and interact with these subjects. Two of these pairs were couples who signed-up together. The other six participants had indicated a desire to play in a pair when they signed-up, and were paired based on availability.

Group B included five subjects who played on a PC and streamed their session over Twitch using a lab account. We let the subjects decide whether to stream their voice and a video feed of themselves, in addition to the game. For this group we sat opposite the streamers at a table with desktop PCs, where we would log into their Twitch stream and interact with them via the Twitch chat. We would also interact in-person with the subjects if they asked us questions or needed technical help. Only one subject was present in the lab at a time. Given the formal differences between playing a game in a couch co-op setting and livestreaming one's play, it may be objected that this second group of participants did not take part in tandem play at all. However, our definition of tandem play was left intentionally broad (two 'or more' players 'engaging' with and 'moving through' the game rather than necessarily 'playing' it) to account for and allow for the analysis of multiple forms of play that move us beyond an individual who engages with a controller, or multiple individuals in actively competing via gameplay. In another paper based on this research we put forth that both our participants and more popular livestreamers often "see their role as being entertaining and playing with others, even if no one may be immediately present to witness that activity" (Scully-Blaker, R., Consalvo, M., Begy, J., Ganzon, S. C. 2016). A streamer we have observed in another context has likewise stated - while streaming - that he believes his stream is much like "playing games with a sibling" (Consalvo & Sugiarto, 2016). These observations lead us to believe that the term 'tandem play' is applicable in many different settings.

After the three sessions, two of us would conduct semistandardized interviews with each participant individually. In a semistandardized interview, a number of predetermined questions are asked of each interviewee in a standard order, but the interviewers "are allowed freedom to digress" so that they might "probe far beyond" the answers given (Berg, 2004, p. 80). The advantage to this method is that interviewers can ask for clarifications and deeper explanations, and even pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry and discussion. Such freedom is essential in an exploratory study, as it can also generate ideas for improvements for follow-up studies. The interview questions covered three topics: demographics, how the subject liked the game, and either how they collaborated with their partner (Group A) or their experiences streaming their gameplay (Group B). If subjects gave simple answers we would ask them to elaborate. We encouraged subjects to speak freely about their experiences in the study, and also had each subject's saved game open (either on the Xbox One or PC) during the interview so they could use it as a reference point if they liked.

Literature Review

This study began as a collaborative survey of methods used to study play, with the aim of devising new methods for studying play and players. This survey was intentionally broad, covering numerous fields including game studies, leisure studies, child development, and sports psychology. What this survey revealed was that the numerous methods for studying play reflected the numerous forms of play itself, and that methods were often devised in reaction to the nature of the play being studied. To give but a few examples: Triplett was interested in the effects of comparative performance on racing cyclists, and so built an elaborate mechanical contraption to simulate this experience in the lab (1898). This device was analogous to the kind of physical effort required by a bicycle, but designed to simulate distance via an observable belt, driven by the subject, with a colored patch on it so that the number of 'laps' could be counted. Multiple machines could be used in the same space to allow subjects to compete against each other, thus enabling a comparison between solo and competitive efforts. This method was effective because it allowed the researchers to take precise measurements in a controlled laboratory setting. Bourke and Sargisson studied children's playground equipment preferences by combining in-person observation sessions with automated still photography (2014). This allowed them to identify trends and preferences based not only on equipment popularity, but also on how that equipment was being used and by what age groups. Garcia investigated the experience of completing jigsaw puzzles by embarking on an extensive autoethnography of her own "puzzling" experiences, followed by interviews with other puzzling enthusiasts (2013). The autoethnography was fitting because jigsaw puzzles are frequently solitary activities, and furthermore gave Garcia an insight useful in designing and conducting her interviews. Woods conducted a study of the preferences of contemporary "euro" board game players through an online survey, which he advertised on BoardGameGeek (2012). This method was ideal because euro games are an international phenomenon, and thereby allowed him to collect a large amount of data from players globally. Closer to our own work, Nardi wanted to understand the culture of *World of Warcraft* players, and so approached the game as a cultural anthropologist would approach a foreign country (2010). This allowed her to build a nuanced picture from the perspective of the game's players.

Researchers have also studied how individuals play games together in physical space via lab-

based and other observation-based studies, also relevant to our study. Bergstrom et al provide an extensive discussion of their own methods relative to studying MMOG players in a lab, writing, "setting and co-located participants can (unintentionally) influence the inferences made from observational data" (2015, p. 108). They conclude that multiple methods are necessary to gain a more accurate picture of the gameplay experience – something we have attempted to do with the use of both observations and interviews.

In a study of individuals who regularly met to engage in group console gaming, Voida and Greenberg found that "the primary motivation for group console gaming was not the games, themselves, but the social interactions afforded by the collocated gameplay" (2009, p. 1561). Downs et al have also argued that "rather than viewing individuals merely as players or non-players, there are a variety of different types of roles and opportunities for participating in different ways" (2015, p. 92). They point to how different individuals present could act as coaches, hecklers, cheerleaders, commentators or spectators at different points throughout a game. Due to those multiple roles and activities, they concluded that the 'active player' or the person holding the controller "was no longer the sole controller of the gameplay any more than they controlled the physical game space" (p. 98).

This survey led us to consider what types of play we might study, as opposed to focusing on methods first. We were interested in the recent rise of Twitch and other gameplay streaming services, but also realized that this new form of play was related to the older practice of groups playing single-player video games together in a common space, passing the controller and having ongoing discussions about the game. Our concept of "Tandem Play" covers both situations, and so to gain further insight into it we decided to study both forms side-by-side.

We also decided to participate in the tandem play in addition to observing. This decision was informed by the fact that the movement from participant-observation to full-on participation is common in game studies. An early such study is Fine's *Shared Fantasy*, which investigated the then-new phenomenon of tabletop role-playing games (1983). Fine argues that mere observation is insufficient to understand gameplay:

> "...I chose to be as much of a regular game player as possible, given the constraints of my note-taking. Generally I was fully accepted by the groups I participated in. I wanted to learn what it *felt like* to contribute to a fantasy world, how I would structure my contributions, and later, when I became sufficiently competent, what it was like to referee a fantasy role-playing game and how a referee constructs a world and a scenario."

> Fine, 1983, p. 289.

The feeling of these experiences was a major part of the appeal to players, and was only accessible via active participation. As Fine writes, "This true participation allows the writer to gain a more intensely personal understanding of the behavioral dynamics of the his social world, and, one hopes, permits the reader a similar experience" (1983, p. 289). Dissolving the line between 'observer' and 'participant' allowed Fine a deeper understanding of his subject than would have otherwise been possible. Pearce came to a similar conclusion over the course of her ethnographic study of a group of MMOG players, during which it became apparent that her desire to maintain some semblance of distance and objectivity was alienating her subjects (2009). The group complained that she was "not a part of them" (231), which, in their eyes, skewed her

findings and conclusions unfairly. She responded by increasing her participation in the group, which included going to more of their events, switching from text-only to voice chat, and allowing her subjects to get to know her better by letting them interview her. Pearce is resoundingly positive about this change of direction and the greater depth it added to her research.

Kolos, in her study of a group of undergraduate students who played video games in an MIT dorm room, was a group participant from the outset: "During visits, I took few notes and instead tried to participate as much as possible in the activities taking place in and around the dorm lounge. This included: playing video and card games, socializing and joking around, eating, and watching TV or a movie" (2010, 30). This participation was complimented by unstructured interviews with the group's members. This mixed-methods approach allowed Kolos to act as a member of the social group she was studying, and to discuss the group critically with her informants, leading to a rich data set. In her book on *Everquest*, Taylor also comments on the importance of playing together with subjects:

> "While the power of play puts me, as a researcher, into new and sometimes unfamiliar,
> risky territory it also gives me a powerful way to connect to the community I study."

<div align="right">Taylor, 2006, p. 8.</div>

These works demonstrate the value of playing along with subjects in order to gain a deeper insight. In terms of our study, tandem play necessarily entails multiple participants, hence our involvement as both players and researchers was appropriate.

Methodological Considerations

In the following sections we discuss four aspects of our study and how they influenced our results: the choice of game, recruitment strategy, our roles as researchers, and the effects of the study subjects having a limited time to play.

Game Selection
One of the first decisions to make was the game subjects would play. We wanted a game that would feature many significant decision points, in the hopes that the need to make such decisions would lead subjects to discuss them with their partner or audience, so that we could observe these interactions to see what impact they had. We also wanted a game that would afford opportunities for subjects to chat with each other or their audience (and for Group A subjects to pass the controller back and forth), either due to a slow pace or periodic interruptions in action sequences. Another consideration was game difficulty – although we knew we would likely get experienced players, we wanted a game that would offer players both different kinds of challenges (combat, moral dilemmas, puzzle solving, etc.) as well as the option to choose their preferred difficulty level. Lastly, we wanted the game to be useful in our recruiting efforts—something that people would want to play and watch.

With these requirements in mind, we decided to use *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (*DAI)*. The game was released in Canada on November 18th, 2014, just as we were preparing the study. *DAI* affords many opportunities for collaborative decision-making, the first of which is right at the start of the game: character creation. The player must create their own protagonist for the story, which entails choosing a gender, a race (Human, Elf, Dwarf, Qunari), a starting class (mage, rogue, warrior), and naming the character. There is then an enormous range of options for customizing a character's appearance, which has no effect on the gameplay. Although this process can take a lot of time, we wanted to see how players in Group A designed a character together, and what impact that might have on the play experience and their individual attachment to said character. For Group B, we were interested in to what extent having an audience would affect how subjects engaged in this process.

However, our subjects did not spend very much time on character creation, and even those who did were ultimately not too invested in the character. There were a few different reasons for this. The first was that subjects were conscious of the limited time they had to play in the study (a factor we discuss in more detail below in "Time Limits"), and character creation was seen as secondary. For example, regarding her and her partner's character, Denise[1] told us that "I'm not particularly attached, I think we both - we just wanted to get through all the intro stuff as fast as possible and we didn't really spend any time [on character creation]." At the extreme end, one Group A pair accidentally skipped the character creation entirely, and ended-up using a default appearance and name; we offered to restart the game for them but they declined.

In the case of Group A in particular, that the player-character was shared seemed to lower investment on the part of both subjects, another reason for the small amount of time spent on creation. Kevin reported that "Because of the nature of this particular project where it was couch co-op, experimental thing I don't think I bonded with my avatar the way I usually could…" Another couch pair regularly made fun of their character's animations and appearance, and we noticed that the subject with the controller would never refer to in-game actions or events in the first-person. In other words, they would not say "I died" but rather "she died," thus always externalizing their shared character's identity. Nadine reported that had she been playing alone she would have spent "3 hours making the character." Nathan, one of the pair who skipped character creation altogether, said in his interview that had he been playing alone he "probably would've gone back and done the character building thing." The shared nature of Group A's player-characters seemed to diminish their investment in designing them.

In the case of Group B, subjects spent a similarly small amount of time creating their characters. Elaine told us that "I think I knew that I was only going to play three sessions, so character creation - I would've spent more time on it if I would have been playing by myself at home or something." One phenomenon we observed amongst this group but not Group A was that two streamers, Elaine and Rick, made characters that looked like themselves. It is not surprising that this only happened with Group B, because doing so with a shared character would be an act of ownership or control that would not align well with the cooperation we observed throughout the Group A sessions. It is also possible that being observed reduced our subjects' investment in character creation—a process that can be deeply personal—but this did not come up in interviews.

The second aspect of *DAI* that we hoped would foster tandem play was the numerous dialogue choices. As players move through the game, they frequently find their character in conversation

with non-player characters, during which they must choose how to respond. These choices are presented to the player in an abbreviated form that indicates the emotion behind the response, as opposed to the more traditional method of selecting what the player character will literally say. Some of these conversations are minor and have little impact on how the game unfolds, but some are quite important. For example, early on there is a conversation wherein the player must decide between taking one of two paths to reach the next plot point, and this decision may not be reversed; the path not chosen never becomes accessible. Players have unlimited time to make these decisions, unlike in games such as Telltale's *Game of Thrones* series. We felt this was a strength of *DAI* as we wanted our subjects to have a chance to reflect on and discuss these decision points. In practice this varied widely between participants, and even with the same participants over the course of a session. In all cases these choices seemed to be intuitive and moment-to-moment, and the interviews showed that players did not really consider this aspect of the game very much.

This conversation mechanic also contributes to *DAI*'s relatively slow pace, which was another game selection criteria. By this we mean that there are almost no moments in the game that require quick reflexes or fast response times. Combat is statistics-based and so the player's dexterity is irrelevant, and is freely interruptible by entering the "tactical camera" mode. Conversations are not timed, as described above, and there are plenty of areas in the game free from hostile non-player characters, which makes it easy for players to take a break or divert their attention elsewhere. These factors create plenty of space for social interaction, and we hoped that our subjects would take advantage of that fact. In other words, we did not want our subjects to *not* interact because the game was pressuring them to make decisions or take actions. For Group A subjects we further hoped that this slower pace would give them opportunities to pass the controller back and forth. By this metric, *DAI* was a good choice: one pair in particular passed the controller every 13 minutes, on average. Subjects in both groups would regularly pause to converse or joke around, which was possible because the game rarely puts pressure on players to act.

In relation to the game's difficulty settings, we witnessed some discussions or issues arising from this feature within both study conditions. Overall it was used – as expected - by different participants in order to customize their play sessions to their liking. In particular, some players did enjoy playing on more than the 'normal' of the game. One of our streamers immediately set the difficultly level to "Nightmare" mode (one of the hardest modes) and in our interview related that she had experience with the game and the series and this was her way of being really challenged. One of our coop pairs tried setting the difficulty setting to a harder mode at one point in gameplay, but after dying repeatedly they changed the setting all the way back to 'casual' to see how much more quickly they could advance in the game, given their remaining time available. We did not ask participants what difficulty setting they would play in if they were playing alone, but it was clear that difficulty mode can be an important element for players' enjoyment of a game, in a variety of ways.

Recruitment
In addition to the reasons outlined in the previous section, we further hoped that using a recent, big game from a successful franchise by a popular developer would be useful in recruiting subjects. However, due to unanticipated delays in the ethics approval process, our study was not cleared until *DAI* had been available for almost two months. This is always a risk when hoping

that a game's novelty will be useful in recruiting subjects. Still, the game did fulfill our goal of attracting subjects: seven of our fifteen participants had zero *Dragon Age* experience, but had heard of the series. Six participants had played some of the franchise before, two of which had also finished *DAI* on their own. The two remaining participants had the most experience, having finished all 3 games in the series before starting the study. This meant that all of our subjects had some idea of what the game was when they signed-up for the study, a point we will return to in "Time Limits," below.

For recruitment we used three methods. The first was sending out emails over local lists, including lists for game researchers and designers at Concordia University, and one for such people in Montreal generally. We also put up flyers around Concordia, and those of us teaching classes encouraged our students to participate. We expressly tried to appeal to gamers, and this strategy worked well. During the interviews we asked our subjects how often they played video games, with answers ranging from "only on holiday" to "fifty hours per week." Although this is quite a large range, the subjects on the lower end of the range universally expressed a desire to play games more frequently. It seems feasible that our study served a legitimizing function by giving them an opportunity to play a game they were interested in, but in a fashion that was not merely "wasting time." We also found this interesting in light of Williams et al.'s finding that people tend to underestimate their time spent playing video games (2009). We theorize two factors contributed to this discrepancy. The first is the nature of the lab space in which the study was conducted: surrounded by video game equipment, participants likely felt they would not be judged harshly for the amount of time they spend playing video games, or for their desire to play more. The second factor relates to the fact that several subjects expressed interest in the function of the mLab and our work as researchers, which may also have been a factor in their enrollment; we discuss this in more detail in the next section, "Negotiating Our Roles." It is also worth noting that although we offered no compensation, of the fifteen subjects there were zero dropouts. This also may have been a result of the subjects' interest in our work, although it seems more likely that the nature of the study (playing a video game however you like) made it more enjoyable than most. The limiting factor in getting subjects proved to be our own time; we could not have fit more into the study's timeframe without extending it into the following semester.

In terms of demographics, our subjects ranged in age from 20 to 42, with a median of 26.6. Seven identified as women and eight as men. All had some degree of higher education: 6 were current undergraduates; 4 had finished a Bachelor's degree; 1 was a current Master's student; 1 had finished a Master's degree; 2 were Ph.D. students and 1 had completed their doctorate. Eight of the ten Group A subjects had played a single-player video game cooperatively before, while only one of our five streamers (Group B) had streamed their own gameplay before.

These demographics clearly reflect our recruitment methods: nine of the fifteen subjects were students, and all had some degree of video game literacy, as reflected by their reported average time spent playing, and their familiarity with the *Dragon Age* franchise. Further, we asked subjects about what kinds of video games they typically play, and all named multiple genres and titles. Lastly, our recruitment materials specifically mentioned that subjects would be playing *DAI*, and so were more likely to attract people who had some idea of what the game was. For these reasons, our findings about tandem play apply specifically to regular video game players, and in the future should be contrasted with a study on how non-gamers engage in tandem play.

We also considered examining how gender or other demographic factors shaped participants' experiences and actions, but concluded that for an exploratory study that featured participants with such diverging gameplay histories and ages it would be better to leave that element to a future iteration of this study.

Negotiating Our Roles

As our study got underway, one thing that soon became apparent was the complexity surrounding our roles as researchers. At each 90-minute session (for both groups) two of us would be present to observe, take notes, answer questions and help out with technical problems. But because this study was about sociality and single-player video games, we decided to act as both researchers and participants, socializing with subjects to foster tandem play.

As described above, in Group A sessions two subjects would sit together on a couch to play, with two researchers sitting off to the side; all four of us would be facing the television. In all cases the subjects would quickly take to laughing and joking together, often making their character do strange or unexpected things. One pair spent considerable time trying to find their way to the top of a waterfall, just so they could jump off it. It was natural for us to join in on the discussion and joking, and it is unclear to what extent this was beneficial to the study (fostering the social environment, and by extension tandem play), or to what extent our presence as silent observers would have made the setting less comfortable for participants. This was compounded by two factors. First, we already knew nine of the fifteen subjects, professionally and socially, before they enrolled in our study. Second, the nature of the space we had to conduct the study was such that other graduate students would regularly come into the lab, and they also often knew the subjects, and so would stay to socialize as well. We ultimately decided that since a perfect experimental setting was impossible, and since there is a precedent for highly participatory roles in games research (as described above), it was best for us to engage socially but as casual observers, not directing the subject's play nor taking a central role in the social interaction. The effect of our presence on the study was mentioned explicitly by Kevin in his exit interview:

> **Interviewer**: I'm curious, you mentioned a few times thinking about it being boring for us, was that something you were thinking about while you were playing or was it just coming up?

> **Kevin**: Absolutely. I was very conscious of the nature of this experiment, the nature of these sessions.

This participant, whom we all knew personally, was concerned about boring us during their play:

> "if I was playing by myself…I would be endeavoring to play it the way I would if I was playing it at home alone which is to say that it would've been very boring for you guys because you would've spent a lot of time watching me read stuff on the screen."

> Kevin, study participant

Had our method been less participatory, for example leaving the two subjects alone to play and video recording them, this would have been less of an issue for Kevin, and may have affected how he played. In lieu of such methods, however, our presence affecting subject behavior seems inevitable but not undesirable. Our goal was to study how tandem play shapes how people play video games, and this is one result: entertaining others can become a goal.

In the case of Group B subjects, the streamers, we quickly realized that we would have to take an active social role, the reason being that the streamers were simply not attracting an audience. In early sessions there would be no more than one or two viewers, none of whom ever interacted with our subjects. We are not entirely certain why this is the case, although we did notice that almost nobody was streaming *DAI* around this time. This is likely because the game had been out for a few months already, and so much of the novelty factor had worn off. As such, for these sessions we would log into Twitch and observe the session that way. We would also interact with the subject via text chat: asking questions, giving advice, making jokes, and so on. If the subjects asked whether it was us in the chat we answered honestly, but did not tell them otherwise. This proved to be a wise decision: as Elaine noted in her interview, "The first session didn't really feel like a stream at all, because there was no one in the chat." In order to enable tandem play we had to participate in the gameplay.

Time Limits

The goal of this research was to study tandem play, and so we expected that the social aspect would have the biggest impact on how people played. For most subjects this was true, however, our interviews uncovered a second major influence on play: the limited duration of the study. As described previously, our recruitment methods attracted people with a lot of video game knowledge, and all were aware that finishing even just the main quest in *DAI* would take much longer than the 4.5 hours they had to play. For example, when asked about how he and his partner decided what to do in the game, Allen told us that he was:

> "pretty okay with doing anything because given the nature of the play sessions, it wasn't like I wanted to progress and finish the story, it was just like let's have fun with the time that's allotted."

<div align="right">Allen, study participant</div>

For Allen, progressing through the story didn't make sense because he knew that there was no way to finish it anyway, which naturally affected the in-game decisions he made. Similarly, when asked about how he felt about the character he made with his partner, AJ answered:

> "I'm not particularly attached… if I was playing this game I would spend a lot of time creating a character and doing all those little tweaks and making it my own thing. But I think in the interest of time we just both were like, 'Let's just pick whatever.'"

<div align="right">AJ, study participant</div>

AJ and his partner did not want to spend time creating a character meaningful to them—and thus did not engage in a relevant discussion or negotiation—because that was less important to them than playing the game; had there not been a strict time limit they could have done both. For Elaine, a streamer, the short duration caused her to prioritize tasks: "I know that I won't be playing anymore so I kind of just talk to people and if it's something I'm not interested in, I'll be like ok, talk to you later. Not." Had she time to play at her discretion, Elaine would have taken on more quests and tried to do more things.

Some of our respondents found themselves negotiating both the shared nature of the experience and the time limit simultaneously. Nadine told us that

"the only thing I regret a tiny bit in our sessions is we didn't have the time to read everything, listen to all the dialogue, but I feel that Nichelle was maybe not as interested as me, so I didn't want to bore her with reading all the text and stuff."

Nadine, study participant

Several of our subjects reported taking their partner, audience (including ourselves), and the time limit all into consideration while playing, such as Kevin:

Interviewer: So then, you're saying that you could only play for four and a half hours also really shaped what you were doing -

Kevin: Yeah knowing I was only going to play four and a half hours and also the fact that I was doing this couch co-op.

Interviewer: This might be hard to assess but do you think that playing with Winston had a bigger impact or the short time frame?

Kevin: Absolutely playing with Winston. That's not difficult for me to assess at all… I think if I was playing by myself, even knowing it was going to be four and a half hours I would be endeavoring to play it the way I would if I was playing it at home alone which is to say that it would've been very boring for you guys because you would've spent a lot of time watching me read stuff on the screen.

For Kevin, playing with his partner had the biggest impact on how he played, as did the time limit. But he also expressed a desire to keep us interested and entertained as well, and thus he had to negotiate a complex web of roles and motivations during his sessions.

This unexpected result shows the strength of semistandardized interviews. We did not ask any of our subjects about time limits, rather the topic arose organically as we asked them about how they would have played differently at home or alone. This result is also a side effect of both recruiting from regular video game players and our choice of game: less knowledgeable subjects might not have been aware of how little they could accomplish in the time allotted, and conversely, a shorter game could have eliminated the time factor altogether.

Conclusion

In this paper we have described how the methodological decisions we made in designing our tandem play study had unanticipated effects. Our choice of game was effective in that it enabled subjects to engage in tandem play and to socialize with each other and ourselves. It also affected our subject pool by attracting regular video game players, who in turn knew that it was a long game. Combined with the time limits on the study, this knowledge unexpectedly affected how our subjects played. The complexity surrounding our roles as researchers and participants also became apparent: the nature of our research questions, combined with the number of subjects we knew personally, meant that our involvement as more than mere observers was both necessary and inevitable. Still, it was important for us to allow the subjects to lead the social interaction and play how they wanted, so our roles as social actors had to be secondary. Although we have

framed these factors in the context of our tandem play study, many of these insights are applicable to lab-based studies of video game players generally.

There is, of course, much more research to be done on tandem play. For example, at the time of this writing we have just begun a follow-up study, based on insights from our *DAI* study, using Telltale Games' *Game of Thrones* (Telltale Games, 2014) series. We chose this game specifically in contrast with *DAI*: it is short enough for our subjects to finish it (thus removing the effect of time constraints), and each individual choice of what to say or do in the game has greater weight than in *DAI*, and so we hope this will encourage more discussion on the part of our subjects and their audiences.

Tandem play in other game types should be studied as well. How people play an open-world game together may differ significantly from a puzzle game or interactive fiction. Deciding on what to do together may be a rather different process than learning a skill together, or solving puzzles together. How does tandem play differ in private spaces—such as an apartment full of friends—and public spaces—like an arcade? Tandem play comes in a wide variety of forms, and there is enormous research potential in exploring those forms.

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[1] All names used here are pseudonyms.