Senses Working Overtime – On Sensuous Experiences and Public Computer Game Play

Fatima Jonsson

Department of Computer and Systems Sciences
Stockholm University
Forum 100
SE-16448 Kista, Sweden
fatima@dsv.su.se

Harko Verhagen

Department of Computer and Systems Sciences
Stockholm University
Forum 100
SE-16448 Kista, Sweden
verhagen@dsv.su.se

ABSTRACT

In this article we will discuss players' experience of computer games in terms of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. We discuss how senses shape and give meaning to players' game play experiences in the game café and a mass LAN party. We also discuss how the social environments in which games are played impact on the experience of playing games. The data is drawn on a field study of public gameplay in a game café and a mass LAN party in Sweden. We conclude by highlighting that the social atmosphere is key to understanding public game play experiences.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Sociology

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Senses, Co-located public game settings, Game café, Mass LAN party, social environment, social atmosphere

1. INTRODUCTION

Playing games in a public co located game environment involves more than just sitting in front of a computer in silence, with the mind focused on the game being played. Computer games are experienced through touch, sight, and sounds, and perceived through certain smells and tastes. In this article we will highlight the role of human senses and the socio-physical environment for an understanding of public computer game play experiences and practices. Discussions concerning the senses in previous game studies have often focused on players' cognitive or perceptual involve-

ment in games or social psychological effects [4][38]. Central concepts in these discussions have been *immersion* i.e. "players perceptual involvement in games, a sense of being "there", and *engagement* which has been described as an involvement occurring when failure to overcome the problem at hand makes the player hesitate, rethink, consider or seek solutions at an increasing distance ... from the on-screen action" [4] and *flow*. Flow as used in [7] describes a state of mind and a feeling when everything is working "right". Douglas and Harden in [18] describe this "as a state where self-consciousness disappears, perceptions of time become distorted and concentration becomes so intense that the game absorbs us".

Common for these perspectives is an assumption that various technologies are able to evoke sensuous experiences in their users. A few studies [31][32] explore human senses in gameplay from a neuroscience and phenomenological perspective. In this article we analyse how human senses shape and give meaning to public game play experiences. We have conducted a field study at a game café and a mass LAN party located in Sweden. Guided by the assumption that sensuous experiences are at the core of everyday living [17] we show the unique ways senses work and give meaning to public game play experiences in a game café and mass LAN parties. We also present a definition of co-located game settings such as game cafés and a mass LAN party.

2. CO-LOCATED GAME SETTINGS

Co-located game settings such as game cafés and LAN-parties located at homes, students' dormitories, a university campus, etc. share some common features. Here people meet face to face to play computer games online or over a LAN (local network area). The emphasis on network games and online games excludes game settings such as casinos, or race tracks where the players have limited chance to affect the outcome of the results of hazard games, such as black jack or betting on horses. The emergence of co-located public game settings, such as game cafés, across the world is notable. In South East Asia, "PC bangs", "Wang bas" and Internet cafés are popular places among youth to play computer games and to socialize with friends [6][22][24]. In Europe these settings have become popular hangout places for teenage boys to play with friends [11][16] and to escape parental surveillance. As noted by Taylor and Witkowski [36] game cafés and LAN parties also have a strong geo-

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

Short presentation, ACE'2011 - Lisbon, Portugal

Copyright 2011 ACM 978-1-4503-0827-4/11/11 ...\$10.00.

graphical component to them, offering an opportunity for people to meet in the physical world. While formal statistics of game café operations, how long they last, and who is using them are not available (<http://www.caslons.com.au>) we argue that playing computer games in co-located public game settings such as Internet/game cafés and LAN parties is a growing global phenomenon as witnessed by previous studies of the use of the Internet in public settings [5][19][30].

To distinguish the game café from other related co-located game settings in public we have outlined a definition of the game café. *A game café is a co-located public game place which provides stationary PC computers, broadband and Internet access, and a large selection of network and online games for a fee. A game café runs a café or a bar, stays open weekly and usually has fewer than 200 seats.*

A game café has stationary PC computers and usually provides high speed Internet access such as broadband. However in developing countries high speed Internet access via broadband is not always available [23]. In game cafés online multiplayer and network games are by far the most popular games at game cafés as these can be used to collaborate with friends.

A LAN party can be described as a real time face to face event that brings people who bring their own computer together and typically runs for a day or over a weekend. These social events involve everything from file sharing and demos to game playing and other activities [36]. LAN parties vary in size across settings, small LAN parties ranging from five to ten people are usually set up at someone's home, mid-sized LAN parties with 100-200 participants are usually arranged in places such as sport clubs, scout clubs, universities, and youth recreation centers, and mass LAN parties with more than 10 000 participants are usually set up in giant exhibition halls. Dreamhack, a massive LAN party held in Sweden two times a year, promotes itself as the world's largest LAN party hosting more than 15 000 participants.

3. A SOCIAL APPROACH TO SENSES OF GAME PLAY

To analyse our data we turn to recent sociological work ([17]) on the human senses that examines the relationship between human senses, place, and the social environment. In a strict biological and psychological tradition, senses were regarded as mere bodily phenomena [17]. This idea was challenged by linguistics and psychologists. From an anthropological perspective senses are not universal, but culturally specific [9]. Anthropological scholars have shown the diversity of perceptions and the culturally specific relationship between different modalities of senses [14]. For instance in a study of Thai massage it was demonstrated that the tactility is experienced differently among people in the West, (Europe and US) and people in East Asia [14]. Kalekin-Fishman and Low [17] note that the most intimate experiences are shaped by and shape social structures and processes.

Following Gibson [12], [17] argue that perception has to do with the prevailing environment. Gibson's term affordances refers to how animal (and men) perceive their environment. "The perception of environment is to perceive what they afford". He notes that "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" [12]. His ecological approach implies the complementarities of the animal, men and the environment.

The animal, men and the environment are inseparable.

Gibson [12] underscores that the ecological reality consists of meaningful things, which offer, permit and guide behaviors and perception. This means that sensuous experiences and perception are not mere customs and habits but are invoked because of surrounding affordances [17] and they stress the notions of senses for our recognition and creation of place and space. They note that space provides a context for meaning and has an objective orientation, while place is connected with identity and subjectivity. We use the notion of 'atmosphere', an emotionally charged space [25] to understand the sensuous experiences in the game café and the LAN party.

4. METHODOLOGY

Most studies of game cafés and mass LAN parties so far (e.g. [13] [16] [19] [21]) use an ethnographic or qualitative approach. There are also a few quantitative studies of LAN parties using surveys to locate and identify the numbers of players, age, gender, and the games being played [15]. The qualitative methods include conversations, focused interviews, participatory observations, observations, focused group interviews, and contextual inquiries [11]. Some field studies take place on several occasions in one LAN party or one game café [28] while other field studies evolve over years at several game cafés [30]. In previous studies the numbers of interviews range between 14 players to 80 participants often of mixed backgrounds, of varied age with a clear majority of male participants [6][11][19][24].

Our data material is based on a long-term field study of a game café in Sweden and a short-term field study of a LAN party in Sweden. The data collection was performed by the main investigator Fatima Jonsson. In the game café field study, observations, conversations, focused interviews and focused group interviews were the data collection methods. It took place at a game café in central Stockholm on a number of occasions during the spring 2005 and during the fall/winter of 2007 respectively. The second field study was conducted at a massive LAN party located in Jénköping, Sweden in 2006 and 2009. Here, participant observation and observation were used for data collection without taking field notes. The time frame and dates of the field studies and interviews with players and staff did not follow any systematically and predetermined choice.

The game café field study was carried out at Galaxy one of the most popular game cafés in Stockholm. The game café was visited once or twice a week for between two and four hours per visit. The research included not only topics about the human senses but also about community, social relationships, identity, time, and place. In total 18 participants were interviewed about one or more issues regarding the sensuous experiences of game play. All interviews took place in the game café, mostly in front of the participants' computers. A few interviews took place on the couch at the game café. When possible, we asked for consent from the staff for the interviews. After about 90 -120 hours of field observations and about 35 interviews with players, the first phase of the field study ended. In the second phase in 2007, staff members were interviewed and informal interviews with about 25 players were conducted based on the analysis of the data from the first phase. In June 2011 Fatima conducted additional focused interviews with staff and 11 players in three game cafés located in Stockholm as a

third phase. The study of the game café comprised about 230 hours of field observations and interviews with 60 persons in total. The topic of senses was touched upon in 9 interviews.

The study of the mass LAN party did not follow standard procedures for ethnography, such as getting immersed and involved with a human culture for a longer time period [26]. Fatima participated in the mass LAN party Dreamhack during one afternoon and evening in 2006 and one and half day in 2009.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Visual experiences of game play

Sight plays a key role in how we interact with games. When we play computer games we interact and experience the games through our eyes. The shift from text based to graphic interfaces was a major change for the visual experience of the games as noted by [3]. Games became more like a film experience as players envision the virtual environment and themselves as graphic avatars on the screen.

In the game café and mass LAN party, the visual experiences of computer games were not limited to the graphic interfaces supported by the game software or to players' interactions with the current game but involved the experiences of watching the game play of other players. Watching game play has been discussed as 'spectatorship' in game studies [36]. In film theory the term points to the relationship between the film and the viewer. In TV studies spectatorship has been described as less active than viewing [10].

In game studies the concept spectatorship challenges the notion that agency is limited to the player who is in control of the input device. Studies of spectatorship have shown that onlookers, people watching, demonstrate a level of interest and engagement by watching the game play of other players [1][27][36]. The engagement in computer games extends to the observers. [27] notes that the pleasure of video games is enjoyed by those that common sense might encourage us to consider non-players, or "onlookers". He notes that players do not actually need to touch the joystick, mouse or keyboard.

At LAN festivals and game cafés people are engaged in various activities simultaneously or they alternate between being players, co-players and spectators. They are constantly shifting between different media and gaming practices. In this section we will show how the spatiality and place affords for different kinds of spectatorship. We will start by discussing a kind of spectatorship in which participants walk around looking at the computer screens of others.

While at Dreamhack I noticed the popular activity of walking around the packed aisles full of people watching and looking at other people's computer screens. This activity has also been noticed by other researchers [36]. At the LAN party walking around looking at other people's game screens fills different purposes, for different players. [36] note that by watching other games and game play, the games you look at can inspire you to reactivate your own sense and desire for play such as playing the game at your own computer. Players are interpreting and recognizing the games that they see based on their former experiences. Furthermore they note that watching a game connects players viscerally and to their own embodied experiences of play [36]. By looking at games that they recognize, players learn

from observing other players' tactics. For the less experienced players and for non-players watching other players' game screens fill other purposes. It can be a pleasurable activity in itself, without intending to learn about a particular game or game tactic.

This mode of spectatorship, wandering up and down the aisles looking at everyone else's machines and set up, resembles the activity of 'window shopping'. 'Window shopping' describes the activity of browsing the windows of shops with no intention of purchasing the products in the windows. This activity can inspire new ideas and input for purchases later on. At the game café and the mass LAN party people were not browsing the windows of shops, instead they were browsing computer screens. Their intentions were similar, to get ideas, information and input for their own game play. We call this activity 'screen shopping'. 'Screen shopping' gives people access to other players' strategies, activities and interactions within the online game worlds.

At the time of the fieldstudy Galaxy had about 90 computers placed in several rooms. In the game café screen shopping was a common practice when players were on their way to the cash register, to buy candy, food or sodas, to go to the bathroom or when taking a break from playing. People were often moving and walking around in the game café while watching other players' game screens. In this particular setting screen-shopping was an *in between activity*, as it occurred between other activities, spontaneously, seizing an opportunity. The following example illustrates this:

Mattias 19 years old was an avid player of World of Warcraft and one of the long term regulars at Galaxy told me that he used to walk around the game café and watch the screens of other players, when he was waiting for an in-game activity to finish. While he was waiting for the in-game activity to finish he used to walk around the game café, talk to other players about their game play and ask them for tips and advice about game equipment.

Fatima: What are you looking at when you are watching the screens of other players?

Mattias: For example what gloves they have. These gloves, (he points at the screen to show a glove in his game) you get these gloves when you are in a certain area and achieve certain things. Then you get good equipment. You progress when you have good equipment. So I ask others "Which is the better glove? This or that one?"

For Mattias screen shopping served a particular function, to learn about specific game tools which helped him progress in the game. This strategy was not unique to him. We found several experienced players who used screen-shopping to learn and find out about particular game tools. This demonstrates that the purpose of spectatorship is more than looking at other players screens, it is about finding out about game strategies and tactics. It is also used to learn about specific game tools.

In co-located public game places such as game cafés and LAN parties there is also another kind of spectatorship, besides the activity of screen shopping, which we will discuss as 'gathering around the screens'. In many cases this activity resembles screen shopping as it could lead players to reactive their own sense and desire for game play, inspire new ideas, and connect them to the games. In other cases gathering around the screens was different from 'screen shopping'.

'Gathering around the screens' usually occurred when people were leaving and entering the game café. Often people stopped by players' seats and computers when they were arriving or leaving the game café. Usually they were gathering around the screens of their friends before or after they went to their seats and logged onto the games. 'Gathering around the screens' was also a group activity, enjoyed with other spectators: friends, peers or strangers. When gathering around the screens of friends, people would causally chit chat with their friends about the games as well as other everyday matters. In this situation the main purpose of gathering around the screens was to hang around and socialize with friends. For people who came along with friends and did not rent a computer 'gathering around the screens' was the sole activity they were involved in while at the game café.

The last example of spectatorship we will bring up is about aiding and solving problems within the game. This kind of spectatorship was encouraged by rolling chairs, sharing the same physical space, and having access to game screens of friends. In the game café, players could run over and help their friends out by looking at friends' game screen, and showing them on the screen how to solve the problem. Game play problems were pointed out, solved and visualized. In the aiding situation spectatorship served to help and support friends during game play.

5.2 The public sounds of gameplay

In game studies discussions of the sounds of games tend to focus on the sounds provided by the game systems themselves. Few studies have taken into account the public sounds emanating from the social surroundings such as people's actions and interactions, music, and public performances. In game cafés and mass LAN parties the public sounds from other players' actions and interactions are significant; often one can hear players scream, shout and yell when they become upset, angry, frustrated, disappointed and happy. These sounds were perceived both negatively and positively by the interviewed players, having either disruptive or enhancing effects on the experiences of the other players.

It is peak time at Galaxy. It is Wednesday afternoon at 4.45 pm. People who have left school and work have occupied Galaxy. Peak time is the most intense period of the day, when people have finished school or work and/or during lunch when people come in for half an hour to play a quick game session. Sitting on the bench in one of the backrooms I hear a boy calling to a friend who is sitting a few seats away to come and look at his computer. "Come, you must see this". Another group of players, who have just logged into Battlefield 2, are involved in an intense discussion about where to go and what weapons to buy. I hear another player shouting out loud with an upset voice "Nooo, fuck. Shit. What are you doing?" In the loud speakers a guitar riff is heard in the background. A group of players are clapping hands, yelling "YES"! From the other end of the room I hear a player calling out his disappointment. Another boy is constantly commenting on his actions in the game for his friend who does not seem to be listening. Later in the evening the soundscape at Galaxy has shifted. Many seats are empty. People are talking with low voices. I can hear the sounds of computer machines and fans, the monotonous roaring sounds from fans and processors, fingers tapping on the keyboards, clicking sounds from the players' interactions

with the mouse, and bodily sounds such as burps, coughing or sneezing. The heavy metal music in the loudspeakers is playing in the background, at low volume. The music does not seem to disturb or interrupt players' concentration.

This example suggests that the public sounds from other players were defining the social environment, whether these were experienced as disruptive or enhancing game play. The nature of the experience was based on participants' expectations of what the atmosphere of a game café should be. Screaming, shouting, and yelling were tolerated by the staff. Only on a few occasions during my stay at Galaxy could I hear the staff ask screaming players to dampen their voices. These sounds that would be considered noise in other public places such as libraries, cafés and cinemas, were a central component of the social atmosphere at Galaxy and therefore not considered "noise". One player told me:

One evening I was sitting here playing by myself and there was a group of guys playing DotA next to me. Then you recognize the social aspect of game play. They (the other players) are sitting there laughing while one of the guys is shouting You son of a bitch. The guy who was sitting next to me was laughing till he was nearly crying.

This comment implies that laughing, yelling, and shouting are a central component of the social game play experience when playing games with friends. Playing computer games with friends is recognized as being verbal and loud. Screaming and yelling in the game café suggests that the social atmosphere in this setting is reminiscent of the social atmosphere at a public sporting event where people are emotionally involved in a game. At these public events game play heightens emotions and is verbal and intense.

At the mass LAN party the environment was lively most of the time. The public sounds that filled the main hall came from players' voices and interactions, the music in the loud speakers, the many social activities going on, and the stage performances. This lively and busy atmosphere enhanced the party atmosphere at Dreamhack. At Galaxy the music played a central role. Its aim was to enhance the party atmosphere. Whether the public sounds inside the game café and mass LAN party are seen as disruptive or an enhancement of game play experiences is a result of social expectations, norms and values within the social environment in which games are played.

The public sounds of a game café and the mass LAN party display both similarities and differences. They are approached differently and promoted differently. In both places music plays an important role. The music defines the atmosphere and the setting and sets out the music subculture that players come to identify themselves with and the "kind of" music subculture that the game café represents. Each game café had its own distinctive music style and preferences. At GamerZone the dominating music genre was hip hop, at Galaxy the music played was Goth and Heavy metal, while at Inter the music was hit music. At the mass LAN party techno music was echoing through the loudspeakers. Despite differences between game cafés there were also different approaches and goals for the music being played in the game café and the mass LAN party.

5.3 Embodied game play

Computer game play is very much a corporeal and em-

bodied experience [2][35]. Co-located game settings such as game cafés and LAN parties allow players to play in the physical presence of friends and others [8][34] and allows for tactile interactions [17]. Poking friends during game play is a common form of social interaction between players at the game café. Gottfrid explained to me:

Fatima: Why do you come here to Galaxy?

Gottfrid: Instead of playing at home?

Fatima: Yes.

Gottfrid: I don't know. I think it is. . . (he pauses) I can sit here and poke him. (He pokes the side of his friend's legs to demonstrate what he means). You are together but in a different way. You can talk online, we use to do that at home. Here, when you are here like this. It is another feeling. It feels like you are a small group of friends who are playing in a LAN at home.

In the game café, just as at the LAN party, people are able to interact with each other physically, in a tactile, corporeal way. Players can reach out and poke each other. This comment, which was not unique for this young man, highlights the meaning of tactile interactions while playing face to face. Being able to interact with each other physically supported the connections within the group of friends. It created a sense of closeness, intimacy and togetherness. This finding suggests that online and offline game play experiences supports a different togetherness among friends. Within a physical offline setting, togetherness is supported by tactile interactions and touching.

Playing at a LAN does also allow for embodied and tactile interactions with co-players. Following Hall [33] classifies four distinct scales of spaces between people. These are the intimate space (less than 0,5 m), personal, social, and physical spaces. These scales are determined by the kinds of physical interactions they permit [33]. The tactile experience of this form of game play at a LAN comes from the sharing of a space and the proximity of that act of sharing and from the establishment and maintenance of friends' interaction [33]. In this setting friends shared a personal space where they could be intimate and physically interact with each other. Poking friends also fills an instrumental function within game play, such as supporting and encouraging each other when collaborating.

Fatima: What do you think about sitting close and near each other?

Matti: It is cosy and feels safe.

Fatima: It is cosy and safe? Can you explain what you mean?

Matti: Yes, if things are going bad (he pokes at the stomach of Carl). You support each other. You say "Come on".

Carl: You support each other. You compete against others.

Fatima: Is it really so?

Carl: Yes, exactly. It is like playing a game of cards but modern cards.

By sitting physically near each other Matti and Carl could support each other verbally and physically.

During collaboration poking becomes a means of supporting each other bodily. The physical environment of the game café encourages the boys to collaborate and support each

other physically. This intensifies and enhances the online interactions and experiences.

A central component of the experience of playing in co-located public game settings is the physical and embodied interactions. People are able to physically interact through immediate direct interactions.

5.4 The taste and smell of LAN

Smell can be perceived as a fundamental domain of cultural expression where the values and practices of society are enacted [9].

"*It smells LAN!*" I heard this comment from a young man when he was entering the main hall of the "Bring your own computer" section at Dreamhack winter 2006. He looked enthusiastically around while talking with his friend. This expression implies that there is a certain way of thinking and sensing computer game play at a mass LAN party. His comment suggests that computer game play is not only recognized by it sounds but also by its smell. The smell of a LAN party has a distinct odor. This odor emanates from thousands of people gathered together in a limited area, human sweat, burps, warm processors, stinking socks and shoes, the smoke from the air canons and people who have not taken a shower for several days.

The comment of the young man can be seen as his personal translation of place and the location of his identity. As noted by [17] "what we absorb through the senses is the substance of our personal translations of abstract space into place and the location of our identities". The distinct smell of the LAN party suggests that his personal experiences of participating in a LAN become translated into place. It provided him with a localization of the environment, the particular atmosphere, and the place. The smell of a mass LAN party is associated with a particular player lifestyle, such as not washing and cleaning yourself, not sleeping, staying up for days at a time, eating fast food, candy and drinking sodas. This culture goes back to earlier hacker generations in which this way of living was part of their lifestyle [20]. Playing LAN is associated with a particular lifestyle, gathering together to play games intensively for several days and nights where hygiene is subordinated. The smell that characterized the mass LAN party was not present in the game café, although the toilets could be filthy.

Does computer game play have a particular taste and what role and function does eating have for computer play experiences within the social contexts of a mass LAN party and a game café? At Galaxy food had two functions: to give players quick energy and to be consumed instantly. This was reflected in the menu which consisted of fast food slices of pirogues and calzones to be heated up in the microwave, snacks, candies and chips, pre-baked muffins, carrot cakes, cinnamon rolls, coffee and tea. Two refrigerators were filled with cans of sodas and energy drinks. The café section was reminiscent of a kiosk or a grill rather than the trendy urban cafés serving healthy lunches and a wide selection of coffee and tea, which are common in Sweden

Eating at Galaxy was supposed to go quick and fast, so as to not disrupt or interfere with game play. Therefore Players were allowed to eat and drink at the computers (except for hamburgers) despite the fact that the computers could get filthy or soaked. However the interviews showed that most of the younger players left for dinner and only had drinks or

candies while at the game café.

Eating candy and drinking sodas was smoothly integrated within game play. We observed players drinking energy drinks and eating candy while they were playing without taking their eyes off the computers and with one hand on the mouse.

Fast food was a central component of the game play experience in these particular environments and associated with a gamer lifestyle. Morgan, a member of staff at the game café GamerZone, told me that in this game café they had tried to sell healthy food such as vegetarian sandwiches and sparkling water but without success. He explains the failure as a component of the subculture.

It seems like it (the food) has to be unhealthy. We have tried to sell healthy food but it was impossible, they want candy and pizzas. When they come to this place it must be unhealthy. It is part of this setting

By stressing that there must be unhealthy food in the game café this comment, suggests that certain tastes and flavors are associated and intimately linked with this setting. Unhealthy food is crucial for the game play experience in a game café and a mass LAN party. People who come to the game café want “unhealthy” fast food, candies, sodas and energy drinks, because the game café is associated with these particular tastes and flavors. Although young people may eat healthy food at home, served by their parents, in the game café they want “junk food” because that is part of the public game play experience in this setting. The taste preferences may be explained by the fact that the gamer culture has a long tradition of eating fast food and drinking sodas [37].

At Dreamhack the food selection and eating routines were both similar and different from that at the game café. They served hot dogs, hamburgers and pre-packaged sandwiches, sodas, candies and snacks. Some people were likely to take a break to eat dinner, leaving their computers. Within the lively social context of on-going social happenings, game events and performances it was meaningful to take a break from game play as there were other activities you could experience on your way to or from the food stand. Unlike the game café the participants did not leave to go home for dinner, because the event lasted for several days. Eating at Dreamhack was a highly effective and rationalized practice. Stacks of microwaves for people to heat up pre-packaged slices of pirogues and calzones were placed in the food section to rationalize eating. At Dreamhack players could eat at the computers without restrictions as they brought their own computers, and therefore were responsible for their own computers. In Sweden energy drinks have become very popular among youth and do not characterize the gamer culture alone. However in the context of public game playing at a LAN party energy drinks are consumed for particular reasons. While we have not studied the potential physiological effects of drinking energy drinks we suggest some social and cultural effects of drinking these. To endure the four days of the event players drank energy drinks since these are loaded with caffeine. At Dreamhack the whole experience was intensified by the intense and spectacular atmosphere afforded by the bright and blinking lights, techno music, people, and the massive stimulation of many parallel activities going on. This may give players a mental kick, a rush and a feeling

of being there. At Dreamhack it was possible for the social environment to increase the speed and intensity of drinking energy drinks rather than the other way around. This idea resonates with the suggestion in [25] that the use of drugs at a dance club is meant to increase the sensuous nature of the experience, to intensify the sense of euphoria. “The intensity, tactility and the stimulatory experience may accentuate the effect of the drug rather than the other way around” [25]. As such the effects of drinking energy drinks at Dreamhack may be different than at Galaxy. At Galaxy, with its relaxed and recreational environment, the effect of drinking energy drinks may be to relax and take it easy rather than to produce arousal or a mental kick.

The food rituals and taste preferences that characterize players at the game café and the LAN party reflect the social and cultural norms regarding the meaning of food and how food should be consumed within these settings. This conforms to the idea that food is not only something to consume in order to satisfy a biological need but that food also reflects social and cultural expectations and norms.

6. SENSATIONAL AND ORDINARY GAME PLAY

Game play at mass game events such as Dreamhack can be described as a “total” experience (see the analysis of clubbing in [25]) as it is a massive stimulation of players’ senses and emotions. Social happenings in constant flow, spectacular visual lighting effects such as blinking lights, neon light shows and colorful light bulbs decorating the computers, the performances on stage, the professional scene, the intense techno music coming from the loud speakers and the thousands and thousands of players gathered together in the main hall all add up to its intensity. The party atmosphere afforded a particular computer game play experience. Playing games at Dreamhack is an intensely sensuous and spectacular experience. Techno and electronic music were the most popular music played at Dreamhack. The pulse and beat from the techno music and the social happenings and the light effects created the feeling of being at a club or party. Being a 72 hour event Dreamhack shares similarities with other marathon youth events such as raving [29], clubbing [25], and pop and rock festivals. Participants in events like these try to stay awake for the whole event because they do not want to miss out on all the fun that these events provide and because not sleeping is a central component of the rave, clubbing or party experience. At Dreamhack the participants were trying hard to stay awake as long as possible, to push their cognitive and mental barriers. Among some groups of friends this activity has evolved to an internal competition. If they fell asleep they might face “punishment” from friends who would take their pillow, or put tooth paste in their nose while they slept or other forms of practical jokes. This notion suggests that participating and playing games at a LAN party is not only a demonstration of game playing skill and competence but also a demonstration of players’ cognitive and mental capabilities.

Contrary to the mass LAN party, which is an extraordinary and spectacular event, taking place once or twice a year, playing games in a game café is a rather ordinary, everyday and mundane activity. The atmosphere inside the game café is usually relaxed and laid back even if players can be intense and upset during game play. Playing games in

this setting is laid back, casual and relaxed, and used mainly for recreational purposes, for hanging out and having a good time with friends.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

During our field studies it became apparent that playing computer games is more than interacting with particular computer games. When people are at a game café or attending a mass LAN party they experience and interact with the games and the environment through their senses. Playing games in a public game setting is a multi-senses experience and these settings afford particular sense experiences.

We have seen that spectatorship is an important concept connected to sight at both a game café and a LAN party. Spectatorship is crucial to the game play experience in these settings, is afforded by the number of computer screens publicly displayed, the long aisles, and friends playing together in the same physical space. Spectatorship comes in several forms, in various contexts and operates at different levels. Spectatorship helps a player learn more about a game, and works as an aid to support friends and others who have run into problems.

We have also seen how the taste and smell of game playing is tied to myths, traditions and cultural norms and social values. At a game café and a mass LAN party eating fast food and candy and drinking sodas are the main “tastes”. The eating habits and organization within the game café and the LAN party show how and what type of food should be consumed in these settings. In these environments eating should be efficient and rational, smoothly integrated into players’ game playing practices, without interfering or disturbing the game play.

The public sounds of game play emerge from players’ screams, talk and the music being played. The volume of the music and choice of music genre suggests that the music in these settings is not unimportant. Music creates the atmosphere and is used to enhance the public game play experience without interrupting game play experience. We have also shown how physical interactions during game play create an intimate game space transforming the public game play into a tactile and physical experience.

The social atmosphere is of crucial importance in understanding why young people attend a game café or a mass LAN party to play network and online games since many players have access to the same games at home. It is largely the social atmosphere that they consume and experience, which may what the players refer to when they say that they go to the LAN party or the game café to have fun. The fun derives from the social atmosphere and people’s actions and interactions afforded by the environment. The consumption of the atmosphere was also crucial for clubbers as pointed out by [25]. People consume and experience the LAN party as a place for partying, fun and sensations. Participating in a mass LAN party can thus be understood as a break from everyday routines and from many of the social norms and customs of the ‘civilized’ social spaces of everyday life such as taking care of daily hygiene, conformity and stress. The atmosphere of the mass LAN party may be reminiscent of the social atmosphere of pop and rock festivals, marathon clubbing or rave parties, lasting for several days and nights.

The game café affords a different game play experience than the mass LAN party, which takes place once or twice per year. In the game café players consume a place to re-

lax and recreate. The relaxed and laid back atmosphere that characterizes the game café may have more in common with the local pub. For most of the regular visitors, playing games in the game café occurs within their ordinary lives, as they visit the game café after school, during lunch breaks, between classes and when they have some time off.

These co-located settings promoted music differently and had different goals for the music. In the game café music was played smoothly in the background, so as to not disturb or interrupt game play, it enhanced the relaxation, while at the mass LAN party music was played in the foreground to enhance the party and festival atmosphere. As such the music promoted and afforded different experiences in these settings. This suggests that we cannot talk about game play as if it was a universal category that can be generalized to all game playing situations. Playing computer games in public involves diverse, sensuous, meaningful and heterogeneous experiences, taking place within various contexts and environments.

Based on this study we want to suggest some areas for future research. Field study of the LAN party needs a more comprehensive focus than we had and should take into account the whole event, for several days, with several researchers who are able to cover several areas. Secondly we argue that designers of LAN parties and game cafés need to take into account the social atmosphere such as the music, food, drinks, interior and people. The atmosphere frames the game play experience, the enjoyment and defines the setting.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments.

9. REFERENCES

- [1] G. S. a. M. Kambouri. Moving between the spectral and material plane interactivity in social play with computer games. *Convergence*, 9, 2003.
- [2] P. Bayliss. Notes toward a sense of embodied gameplay. In B. Akira, editor, *Situated Play: Proceedings of the 2007 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, pages 96–102, Tokyo, September 2007. The University of Tokyo.
- [3] J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin. *Remediation Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 2000.
- [4] D. Carr. Contexts, gaming pleasures, and gendered preferences. *Simulation & Gaming*, 36(4):464–482, 2005.
- [5] D. Chawla and R. Behl. Perception study of cyber café users. *Global Business Review*, 7(1):17–41, 2006.
- [6] F. Chee. The games we play online and offline: Making wang-tta in korea. *Popular Communication*, 4(3):225–239, 2005.
- [7] M. Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial, first edition edition, Mar. 1991.
- [8] Y. A. W. De Kort and W. A. Ijsselstein. People, places, and play: player experience in a socio-spatial context. *Comput. Entertain.*, 6:18:1–18:11, July 2008.
- [9] M. N. Figuié and N. Bricas. *Everyday life in Asia : social perspectives on the senses*, chapter Purchasing

- Food in Modern Vietnam: When Supermarkets Affect the Senses, pages 177–194. Farnham, Ashgate, 2010.
- [10] J. Fiske. *Television Culture (Studies in Communication Series)*. Routledge, new edition edition, Feb. 1988.
 - [11] B. J. Gajadhar, Y. de Kort, W. A. IJsselstein, and K. Poels. Where everybody knows your game: the appeal and function of game cafés in western europe. In *Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*, pages 28–35, 2009.
 - [12] J. Gibson. *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1979.
 - [13] C.-Y. Hung. Video games in context: An ethnographic study of situated meaning-making practices of asian immigrant adolescents in new york city. In B. Akira, editor, *Situated Play: Proceedings of the 2007 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, pages 248–253, Tokyo, September 2007. The University of Tokyo.
 - [14] J. Iida. *Everyday life in Asia : social perspectives on the senses*, chapter The Sensory Experience of Thai Massage: Commercialization, Globalization and Tactility, pages 139–156. Farnham, Ashgate, 2010.
 - [15] J. Jansz and L. Martens. Gaming at a LAN event: the social context of playing video games. *New Media & Society*, 7(3):333–355, June 2005.
 - [16] F. Jonsson. A public place of their own. a fieldstudy of a game café as a third place. In P. Lankoski, A. M. Thorhauge, H. Verhagen, and A. Waern, editors, *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*, Stockholm, January 2010. University of Stockholm.
 - [17] D. Kalekin-Fishman and K. Low. *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses*. Ashgate, 2010.
 - [18] A. Kerr, J. Kücklich, and P. Brereton. New media - new pleasures? *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(1):63–82, 2006.
 - [19] B. Kolko and C. Putnam. Computer games in the developing world: The value of non-instrumental engagement with icts, or taking play seriously. In *Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD), 2009 International Conference on*, pages 46–55, april 2009.
 - [20] S. Levy. *Hackers - heroes of the computer revolution*. Penguin Books, 1984.
 - [21] S. Liff and A. S. Lægran. Cybercafés: Debating the meaning and significance of internet access in a café environment. *New Media & Society*, 5(3):307–312, 2003.
 - [22] H. Lin. Gendered gaming experience in social space: From home to internet café. In de Castell Suzanne and J. Jennifer, editors, *Changing Views: Worlds in Play: Proceedings of the 2005 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, Vancouver, June 2005. University of Vancouver.
 - [23] S. Lindtner, B. Nardi, Y. Wang, S. Mainwaring, H. Jing, and W. Liang. A hybrid cultural ecology: world of warcraft in china. In *Proceedings of the 2008 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work, CSCW '08*, pages 371–382, New York, NY, USA, 2008. ACM.
 - [24] F. Liu. It is not merely about life on the screen: urban chinese youth and the internet café. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 12(2):167–184, 2009.
 - [25] B. Malbon. *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, chapter The club, clubbing: Consumption, identity and the spatial practices of every-night life, pages 266–286. Routledge, 1998.
 - [26] D. Miller and D. Slater. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Berg Publishers, first edition edition, July 2001.
 - [27] J. Newman. The myth of the ergodic videogame - some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames. *Game Studies*, 2(1), 2002.
 - [28] H. Nordli. *The Net is not Enough: Searching for the Female Hacker*. PhD thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2003.
 - [29] B. Richard and H. Kruger. *Cool Places. Geographies of youth cultures*, chapter Ravers Paradise? German Youth cultures in the 1990s, pages 161–174. Routledge, 1998.
 - [30] T. Salvador, J. W. Sherry, and A. E. Urrutia. Less cyber, more café; enhancing existing small businesses across the digital divide with icts. *Inf. Technol. Dev.*, 11:77–95, January 2005.
 - [31] E. Shinkle. 'feel it, don't think: the significance of affect in the study of digital games. In *DIGRA Conf.*, 2005.
 - [32] E. Shinkle. Video games, emotion and the six senses. *Media, Culture & Society*, 30(6):907–915, 2008.
 - [33] Q. Stevens. *The ludic city: exploring the potential of public spaces*. Routledge, 2007.
 - [34] M. Swalwell. Multi-player computer gaming: 'better than playing (pc games). *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 3(4), 2006. Retrieved from <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/034/swalwell.htm>.
 - [35] T. Taylor. *Play between worlds: exploring online game culture*. MIT Press, 2006.
 - [36] T. L. Taylor and E. Witkowski. This is how we play it: what a mega-lan can teach us about games. In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, FDG '10*, pages 195–202, New York, NY, USA, 2010. ACM.
 - [37] S. Turkle. The second self: Computers and the human spirit. *Technology and Culture*, 27(4):870, 1986.
 - [38] Z. Whalen. Play along - an approach to videogame music. *Game Studies*, 4(1), 2004.