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# Notes on the Biographical Meaning of Games and Online-Games

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Players of video games are usually stereotyped as young and male. That players become older and video games abide in peoples' lives is still a new perspective on video games (i.e. *Pearce* 2008). Recent American studies assume that the average age of video game players is 29 (Grüninger/Quandt/Wimmer 2008). As Taylor pointed out, age plays an important role for the self reflection of online players (Taylor 2006, p. 7). This is the starting point of our research project "Cultures of Gaming. Towards the Biographical Meaning of Games and Online-Games" („Spielkulturen. Zur biographischen Bedeutung des Spielens und des Online-Spielens“), which focuses on the meaning of Games and Video Games in biographical perspective. The project started in November 2007 and is located in the research stream "Analysis of Technology and Innovation" at the German Federal Ministry of Research and Technology.

In this paper we would like to introduce the project, mainly the biographical method which delivers the basic material for our study. Thereafter, we will present some of the results so far. In a broader sense, we would like to argue that for an adequate understanding of video games, it is important to include an offline and non-digital perspective on games and a perspective that is aware of the historical dimension of the devolution. This is a perspective that is grounded in the ethnographic approach of studies of everyday life in European Ethnology / Social Anthropology (Lipp 1993) and Cultural Studies (Grossberg 2004).

The main method is the biographical interview, which means that we talked with people about play, video games, the use of technology and their life stories. The interviewees belonged to three age groups (25 to 35 years, 45 to 50 years and 60 to 70 years). In the oldest group we interview persons, who play online-games as well as none-players. We tried to conduct the interviews as conversations, which means that we did not use a strict guideline, but instead offered the interviewed persons the chance to make their own focus in the conversation.

In general, it was not difficult to find people older than 60 years for an interview who play computer games. However online players are, as far as we can see, very rare. A short survey with the members of the Hamburg senior computer club showed that many of the members play computer games, but only three of over 150 are playing online. Many of the older players play games that are known from the real life, such as card games. Beyond that they do play games that come along with their operating system, such as Solitaire that comes with the Windows operating system.

We would like to introduce some aspects of the analysis of the interviews. Each transliterated interview was coded by us, which means that we tried to sum up systematically meaningful parts of the interview. Thus we have a list of categories for

each interview and a first impression of the so called “Spiel-Biographie” (“game-“or “play biography”). Comparing these categories we found on a second level four main categories that seems to be important for the context between play, video games and biographical reflection.

These four main categories are:

1. Modes of speaking about Games/ Play
2. Games and Biography
3. Evaluation and Experience
4. Adoption of Technology

In the following, we would like to introduce some aspects of the reconstruction of narrative identity (Lucius-Hoene/ Deppermann 2004) and exemplify each with one example from the interviews.

1. The first main category concerns the modes of speaking about games in general. Apart from the content, it is important to include the linguistic modes for the cultural analysis, to consider the basic conditions that are needed to speak about games. Talking about experiences that were made *in* games seems to be very different from talking about experiences that are made in the world outside games.

Our main attention is on the characteristic patterns that were used repeatedly in the interviews when talking about games.

Such typical patterns of talking about games are:

Analogies between games and other media that were used to explain certain aspects of a game that the interviewer did not know. For example interviewed persons used a reference to a book or film to illustrate a certain experience in a game, e.g.: “Imagine you can direct Frodo.”

The way the interface between online and offline is described in the interviews.

The experience of how time seems to pass by faster while playing video games

The way the interviewed persons describe the communication with the computer.

We would like to discuss this aspect in detail with the problems in describing games. It was remarkable that in some of the interviews the respondents pointed out the difficulties in describing games and in explaining what was fascinating about games. The interviewed person in the first example is a 42-year-old male Video Game player pointing out that he cannot describe the fascination:

HM: “Ok, I am asking you again, because I´d like to have examples for how / for what is so fascinating. What seems so exciting, you know?”

I: “I can´t describe it. As I have said before: to achieve the highscore or being in the Bestseller-List. This was appealing.”

(HM: "Also, ich frag da noch mal so nach, (...) weil ich immer gerne so Beispiele hab ' dafür wie / was eigentlich daran so faszinierend ist. Was so spannend ist, weißt du?"

I: "Ich kann das selber gar nicht so beschreiben, wie gesagt: nachher die meisten Punkte zu haben oder ganz oben in der Bestseller-Liste zu stehen, so das war eben halt der Anreiz, da."

In the second example a 69-year-old woman talks about the (real life) card game "Schwimmen" (Swimming). One interviewer (HM) does not know the game, the other (GH) does:

HM: "What is it then Swimming?"

I: "Swimming, hehe (she drums with her finger nails on the table), how shall I explain this? This is a card game. The dealer gets two times three cards."

GH: "Ah, yes, now I do remember again" (laughing)

I: "Then you could explain the game!"

GH: "No!"

I: "Come" on! Explain it, explain it!"

HM: "Was ist denn 'Schwimmen'?"

I: "'Schwimmen', hehe" ((trommelt mit ihren Fingernägeln)) ((lacht)), „wie soll ich das denn jetzt erklären? Das ist ein Kartenspiel. Der Geber kriegt zwei Mal drei Karten,..“

GH: "Ah ja, jetzt erinnere ich mich wieder." ((lacht))

I: "Und - kennen Sie?"

GH: "Ja ja."

I: "Ja. Ja dann können Sie's ja erklären!"

GH: "Nee." ((lacht))

I: "Erklären Sie mal, erklären Sie mal!"

A third example is taken from an interview with a 39-year-old man. The subject is again the difficulty in explaining a game. The interviewed person is reflecting on why an explanation is so difficult.

I: "Maybe playing is a base item. And this is the reason why you can't explain it. I don't want to make excuses but maybe this is why I can't explain it."

I: "Vielleicht ist das Spielen eine Grundgröße. Und deswegen kann man sie auch nicht erklären! Ich will mich jetzt nicht rausreden, aber vielleicht kann ich sie deshalb nicht erklären!? (...)"

These examples show that there are certain difficulties in talking about games. Explaining and describing a game was often difficult for the interviewed persons, especially assuming that a game was not known by the interviewer. Thus, one person showed the game at the computer instead of explaining it. More generally speaking, this means that it seems difficult to translate games experiences into an everyday life language and that the activity of playing is not necessarily transformed to a level of everyday life. Especially the experienced immersion is very difficult to verbalize.

2. Our second main category deals with the context between biography and play. The main point is here how people talk about their life story and the meaning of play, which games the interviewees remember and which role playing takes up for the biography. As far as we can see it now, the evaluation, both of the role of games and a particular enthusiasm for play, is usually something that is founded by the interviewed persons in their childhood. These basic perspectives on play give an insight to the “play biography” (“Spielbiographie”, “Spielerbiographie” (Scholtz 2006, p. 215)). When talking about certain play experiences, it often turns out that they are remembered in a context with other biographical experiences. For example, when older interviewed persons talk about childhood play most of them talk about the circumstances in the postwar world that influenced their playing. The social context of playing as it is constructed in the interview is as important as the relationship with other family members that is mirrored in the game experiences.

We would like to illustrate this aspect of the biographical meaning with the early videogames experience. In some interviews even detailed memories of the video games were presented that were played long ago. These memories were mainly told by males between 30 and 40. It was noticeable here that these memories often contain the detailed circumstances around the purchase of the first computer, for example the Commodore 64, and the played games. Detailed memories of dates and the friends with whom the games were played are also characteristic. This comes along with the biographical reflection of times of intensive and excessive playing.

This can be seen in an interview with a 38-year-old male that these memories are still alive. He bought a second-hand Atari at Ebay shortly before the interview, an Atari which was the same model that he played when he was young:

I: “This purchase of the Atari was a try to see, if I still find it amusing or if it has some kind of nostalgia effect to me.”

I: “Dieser Neuerwerb, sag ich mal, dieser Atari war halt einfach mal so 'n Versuch, so noch mal so zu sehen, ob ich das da immer noch so lustig finde, oder einfach so'n Nostalgie-Effekt hat.“

3. The third main category deals with the different evaluations and motives of play that emerge from the interviews. A preliminary systematisation shows the positive and negative effects that were associated by the interviewed persons in the interviews.

The positive effects of playing as seen by the interviewed persons are:

- being in company and the social value of playing,

- Learning by playing
- Relaxation
- the competitive character of playing
- Learning to lose
- Games as an intellectual appeal
- Training the memory.
- Typical patterns of the negative effects that can be caused by playing are:
  - The lack of human aspects in video games
  - Fear of the addiction to games
  - Playing is seen as a waste of time

Another important aspect of the evaluation of games, which we would like to emphasize, is how changes of games and playing in general are being viewed, particularly in relation to the preferences of playing. Especially the older interviewed persons said that they noticed a change in the quality of playing. Looking at their children or grandchildren, they state that these lost the ability of "true" playing. This was often explained with an overweight of the consumption of media and videogames. In this context, playing in their own childhood is idealised as more creative, more active and closer to nature.

For example the interviewed 72-year-old Mrs. Miller described in the interview that she noticed that the children would not learn to play "right" nowadays, because their parents did not spend enough time with them:

"And today I always hear: "Keep yourselves busy on your own. I want to have my privacy. This is totally different than in former times. But I think that the children today do not learn to play in the right way."

"Und heute sehe ich dann immer oder ich höre, "Beschäftige dich alleine, ich brauch mal meine Ruhe!" Das ist also gegenüber früher also ganz anders geworden (...) Aber ich finde, dadurch lernen die Kinder auch nicht mehr das richtige Spielen."

Compared with her own playing habits an interesting contrast can be noted: Being alone, she usually plays Solitaire three or four hours per day on her personal computer.

We found a similar stress ratio in another interview. Mrs. Sheinkin plays Bridge on the computer to learn for the real-life-Bridge. In general, she described herself as someone who likes to play, and she emphasises the positive effects of playing. She states that playing is important because "you can learn to lose and this can be useful for your life" ("weil man nämlich auch verlieren lernt und das ist etwas, was im Leben

auch gut brauchen kann“). Other positive effects in her opinion are that you learn by playing, that it means to have social contacts and that the memory is trained.

In contrast to these positive views on playing she criticizes the fantasy worlds in other video games and explains that she does not like when children play too much video games:

”With those fantasy worlds. (...) I don’t enjoy them. Why shall I let’s say as a princess walk through an imaginary world and most of the time it’s all about shooting and chasing. I don’t like it. I don’t like it when the children play too much. They lose their fantasy.“

“Aber so mit diesen Fantasiewelten, (...) Das macht mir keinen Spaß, warum soll ich da nun, als sagen wir mal, als Prinzessin da durch eine imaginäre Welt und meistens geht es dann ja doch um Knallerei und Verfolgung. Find ich nicht gut. Ich find auch nicht gut, wenn die Kinder zu viel spielen. Die Fantasie leidet, ihre Fantasie leidet.“

A third example shows something similar. The interviewed female senior Mrs. Alex described how she started playing on the personal computer by finding accidentally Solitaire, which is usually the only game she is playing. The positive aspects are that she can relax and that she is happy about the challenge:

”And then I got the laptop. And I started with the computer and then: ‘Solitaire, what’s this?’ and then I started playing. It must have been around 2003. Maybe it became some kind of passion for me, but I want to keep mentally fit. And I’m happy, when I made it. To be honest Solitaire means that I can relax.“

(“und dann bin ich eben an den Laptop gekommen. Und dann habe ich da so ein bisschen rum gefummelt und dann, ja, ‘Solitär, was ist das?’ und dann hab’ ich da angefangen. Das muss dann 2003 (...) Vielleicht ist es schon halbwegs ‘ne Manie von mir, aber ich will geistig fit bleiben, nicht? Und da freut man sich, dass man eben das eben geschafft hat. Und also ich muss auch ganz ehrlich sagen, Solitär ist für mich auch oft Entspannung.“)

Though Mrs. Alex is a frequent internet user her diffuse knowledge about online games comes from television. This is emblematic for the older respondents. Although they do play at the computer, they have more or less critical perspectives on typical videogames:

HM: “You know probably these online-roleplaying games and the virtual worlds. Have you heard about that? Are you interested?”

I: “I would like to have a look, but what is shown on TV is not mine. Mostly on TV the violent games are shown with shooting. And this is absolutely anything for me.“

HM: “Sie kennen ja wahrscheinlich auch diese Online-Rollenspiele, und diese ganzen virtuellen Welten. Haben Sie davon mal gehört? Interessiert Sie das?”

I: “Ich möchte mal reingucken, aber was so im Fernsehen so manchmal gezeigt wird, nicht? – Ist nicht mein Ding! (...) Nun werden ja auch meistens im

Fernsehen so diese Krawallsachen gezeigt, wissen Sie, mit dem Schießen. Und dafür bin ich nicht zu haben. Absolut nicht.“

4. The last main category deals with the relationship between the adoption of technology on one hand and video games on the other hand and how far their use influences each other. Our main focus here is the question of how significant a role video games play in the adoption of new technology in everyday life, especially for older people. The biographical perspective of the interviewed younger persons shows clearly that the reason for the purchase of the first computer often was to play.

Regarding the interviews with the older persons, we would like to discuss some rather different aspects concerning the adoption of computer technology.

First it was remarkable that only in one case the games were the motivation to start working with the computer. The interviewed Mrs. Miller describes at the beginning of the interview that a friend showed her games and motivated her to buy a computer:

GH: “I would like to start with the question, how you got in contact with video games?”

I: “Until last year I had no contact. My friend is a computer freak. She knows it all very well. She encouraged me and then I bought a second-hand computer. She showed me a lot of things. I started with simple games. But I don't play them at the moment, because I like to play with real cards, for example Solitaire.“

GH: ‘Ich würde gerne mit der Frage beginnen, wie Sie eigentlich mit Computerspielen überhaupt in Kontakt getreten sind?’“

I: “Also bis zum letzten Jahr überhaupt nicht. Meine Bekannte, die ist ja so ein Computerfreak, die kann das alles so toll. Die hat mich eigentlich dazu animiert, dann hab ich mir diesen Gebrauchten erstmal genommen, und dann hat sie mir so einiges gezeigt. Am Anfang hab bin ich mich mit Spielen, also mit diesen hier, so ganz einfachen beschäftigt. Und die spiel ich jetzt aber überhaupt nicht mehr, so gut wie gar nicht, weil ich also sehr gerne Karten spiele, unter anderem Patiencen legen.“

Usually the older persons had other reasons to start with the computer. More typical is another older female interviewee, who describes how she could not follow the conversations at a Christmas family meeting and took this as a motive force to make a computer course for seniors:

I: “It was one Christmas evening, when we were all together. There were these conversations in our family about things of which I had no idea. It became obvious for me that I had to deal with the computer and so I visited a course at the senior academy.”

I: „Und zwar nach einem Weihnachten, als wir alle zusammen waren und immer diese Gespräche über Begriffe durch den Raum flogen, von denen ich also null Ahnung hatte, und damit wurde mir klar, ich muss mich damit beschäftigen, und dann hab ich hier in der Seniorenakademie einen Kursus gemacht.“

## Conclusion

We have introduced our research project, in which we are trying to analyze the context between play, video games and biography or rather life history with a focus on senior playing people.

With the biographical interviews we gathered data for the analysis that allows to reconstruct the perspective of the interviewed persons and to trace the "Spielbiographie" or rather "play biography". With some examples from the interviews we were arguing that it is important for an everyday life perspective on video games to include experiences outside the plain game experience. On a first level this means to be aware of the conventions concerning the talk about games. Secondly we were trying to name some aspects of the context between the biographical reflection and play experiences. Thirdly we were introducing some of the characteristic evaluations and lastly the adoption of technology as one aspect that influences the behaviour towards computer and video games.

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