Adversarial Couch Co-Op: Joshing and Griefing in Co-Located Cooperative Gaming

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ABSTRACT
Co-located cooperative gaming, colloquially referred to as couch co-op, offers unique player interaction experiences. It is a rich area of inquiry where significant aspects of the experience are co-constructed in the moment through interaction between players, technology, and environment. Understanding these interactions has substantial implications for the development of games for entertainment as well as other purposes.

The literature on cooperative games mainly deals with online co-op or avoids making a distinction between local and online play (e.g. Björk & Holoopainen 2004, Seif El-Nasr et al. 2010). There are exceptions that explicitly put focus on co-located interaction (eg. Aarsand & Aronsson 2009, Dahlskog, 2012, Gajadhar 2012), or co-located games (eg. Zagal et al. 2006, Grønbæk et al. 2007, Jürgensen & Rasmussen 2009) but these only scratch the surface of the many aspects involved.

As part of a larger project on co-located cooperative gaming, we have engaged in substantial amounts of participant and non-participant observations playing and observing over a hundred different co-op games with participants differing in sex, age, and gaming habits. While the focus has been on video games, we have also studied board and card games. We have also conducted in-depth interviews and gathered information and personal accounts of couch co-op experiences from the web and other sources.

Rather than broad strokes outlining of the properties of couch co-op interaction in general, the purpose of this presentation is to provide a rich description of one particular aspect: adversarial couch co-op. While players per definition share goals or objectives in these games, it is a well-known but previously not studied phenomenon that the interaction between collaborating players sometimes involves competitive or disruptive elements.

It may seem contradictory that a cooperative game mode leads players to act against each other, but it is the collaborative framework that generates the key ingredient: trust. Take
the football gag in *Peanuts* (Schultz 1950-2000) as an example. The reason Lucy can perform her prank is that she and Charlie Brown are on the same team. In couch co-op games, there is usually more give and take, but the players are bound together by trust, and stretching that bond creates a tension resulting in engaged and often innovative interaction.

Game developers have identified the pleasures of this playful adversarial interaction and games like *Rayman Origins* (Ubisoft 2011), *Ratchet & Clank: All-4-One* (Insomniac Games 2011), and *Battleblock Theater* (Behemoth 2013) are full of hints that joshing with the other players is encouraged. Way of pitting players against each other include keeping separate scores or to provide first come first serve access to limited resources. In describing the gameplay of *Ratchet & Clank All-4-One* (2011), one of our informants said: “It’s eighty percent cooperative, twenty percent: That’s my box!”

Players have always found ways to be adversarial, but in older games this could often make the progress grind to a halt. Two informants (brothers and self-declared hardcore gamers) stated that *The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures* (Nintendo 2004) is unplayable. The possibility of picking up and throwing other players off cliffs coupled with a need for all players to complete the levels was an insurmountable obstacle for them. This surprised me who only had played the game with older, more casual, academics and not encountered these issues.

One of our informants repeatedly displayed an adversarial trait that goes beyond joshing. He seemed to be fine with causing failures for the whole team, without it being the result of escalating joshing reciprocity. We noticed that this griefing (Foo & Koivisto 2004) behavior was consistent between different games and genres, but that it differed depending on the participants and the level of challenge that the game provided. It seemed that as long as a game kept him on his toes, he did not grief, but as soon as the game allowed the players to relax a little, he would start forming malicious plans.

When we were playing the *Animal Crossing: Sweet Day* mini game in *Nintendo Land* (Nintendo 2012), he managed to convince the players on his team to employ an elaborate but ultimately suboptimal strategy, which led the team to lose repeatedly. My reading of the situation was that he constructed a new game where getting the teammates to do what he told them became his goal, rather than winning. He had cast himself in the role of the traitor; a role familiar from board games such as *Shadows Over Camelot* (Cathala & Laget 2005).

My presentation will further discuss these and other emergent characteristics of adversarial cooperative play.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Behemoth (2013) *Battleblock Theater*. [Xbox 360], Microsoft Studios.


