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**Proceedings Paper:**

Deterding, Christoph Sebastian orcid.org/0000-0003-0033-2104 (2015) The Joys of Absence: Emotion, Emotion Display, and Interaction Tension in Video Game Play. In: Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015). Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games , Pacific Grove, CA

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# The Joys of Absence: Emotion, Emotion Display, and Interaction Tension in Video Game Play

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## ABSTRACT

Few theories of gaming enjoyment have focused what is absent in gameplay. One exception is Erving Goffman's sociological theory of "euphoric ease". Because spontaneous and socially demanded emotional involvement often align in gameplay, Goffman holds, it lacks the effortful self-monitoring and self-regulation of conduct and emotion typical for everyday life. This paper presents an empirical grounding of Goffman's theory, drawing on a qualitative interview study on social norms of emotion regulation in video game play. Data suggests that the absence of emotional self-control may indeed be a hygiene factor of game enjoyment most strongly found in solitary gameplay, afforded by a socio-material setting that licenses gaming-typical emotions and shields from potentially disapproving onlookers.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.m [INFORMATION INTERFACES AND PRESENTATION (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous

## General Terms

Human Factors.

## Keywords

Enjoyment, euphoric ease, dysphoric tension, emotion, emotion display, emotion work, feeling rules, interaction tension, involvement, video games.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Why is gameplay enjoyable or "fun"? Over the past two decades, researchers have exerted considerable effort to answer this question [1]. One shared assumption of this work is that enjoyment arises from the *presence* of certain phenomena that generate *positive experiences*. Research informed by self-determination theory, for instance, posits that games *present* us with challenging tasks and ample success feedback, which together produce *positive experiences* of competence need satisfaction [22]. One may call this common denominator *enjoyment-as-present-positives*.

However, even the crudest mathematical calculus suggests that the overall valence of an experience can be raised in two ways: increasing positives and reducing negatives. Beyond longstanding philosophical and religious notions of human contentment as the absence of negative experience, psychological research indicates that both increasing positive and reducing negative emotions are important for improving a person's overall happiness and well-being [27]. Following this line of reasoning, gameplay likewise may be enjoyable – or more precisely, more enjoyable than "typical" everyday activity – not just because it presents elements that generate positive experience, but also because it *lacks* otherwise common elements that generate *negative experiences*, i.e. *enjoyment-as-absent-negatives*.

While there is an abundance of research on gameplay enjoyment as present positives [1], little if any work has explored the role of such absent negatives. One exception is sociologist Erving Goffman. Game research has mainly employed Goffman's frame analysis [19] to theorize the social construction of gameplay boundaries ("the magic circle") [8]. And yet, his essay "Fun in Games" [17] entails a genuine sociological theory of gameplay enjoyment, grounded in his larger theoretical project of charting "the interaction order" [18]. Goffman argues that in gameplay situations, what the individual spontaneously wants to get involved in and what is situationally proper to be involved in are frequently aligned, freeing the individual from otherwise constant effortful, unenjoyable self-monitoring and self-regulation, as well as unenjoyable embarrassment over improper conduct. This absence of "interaction tension" is experienced as "euphoric ease" – fun in games ([12], pp. 243-58; [17], pp. 38-58).

Though not implausible, there has been no empirical work to date probing Goffman's theory. To address this gap, this paper presents qualitative interview data on one central aspect of interaction tension in video game play: the regulation of emotion and emotion display. After outlining Goffman's theory of interaction tension and the methodology of the study, the paper will demonstrate the specific "feeling rules" of leisurely gameplay, and how effortful emotion regulation detracts from game enjoyment. Contrary to Goffman's claim that interaction tension is chiefly anchored in the internalized and enacted norms of human actors, data indicates that the material features of gaming spaces partake in it. Leisurely gameplay predominantly occurs in private spaces physically shielded from non-participating others, which reduces perceived self-regulation demands. Where mobile devices take gameplay into public, interaction tension is more likely. Thus, solitary gaming in private spaces was reported as the least regulated and hence most enjoyable. The conclusion will contextualize the findings in contemporary game enjoyment research, point out limitations, and end with research directions opened by it.

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Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015), June 22-25, 2015, Pacific Grove, CA, USA. ISBN 978-0-9913982-4-9. Copyright held by author(s).

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The overarching goal of Erving Goffman's work was to establish "the interaction order" as a social phenomenon of its own right [18]: everyday face-to-face interaction is grounded in its own preconditions (first and foremost response presence: the ability to mutually perceive and act on one another, in mutual reflexive awareness of this fact); it shows its own orderliness, regularities, and types (notably frames as types of social situations [19]); and it is reproduced by its own interconnected processes – a "little social system" of its own ([14], p. 196). Goffman identifies two intertwined mechanisms that keep face-to-face interaction running, and running orderly: embarrassment and involvement.

Humans are social beings: their physical and emotional survival depends on others. From birth to old age, human individuals therefore have to maintain the affection, benevolence, and trust of their conspecifics. The survival of human societies in turn depends on individuals behaving reliably and competently. *Embarrassment* is the social glue that ensures both in everyday interaction ([13]; [15], pp. 6-45): In tune with contemporary social psychology [21], Goffman argues that embarrassment is a reflexive social emotion emerging relatively late in individual development. As children start forming a notion of their self based on other's responses to them across a variety of situations, they also internalize their society's norms of proper and improper, competent and incompetent behavior for different roles in different situations (e.g., how to be a proper "guest" when "going to a restaurant"). If we fail to abide by these norms, others will likely devalue and distrust us. Embarrassment internalizes this imagined disapproval of others into self-devaluation, which motivates the individual to prospectively avoid acting in ways that would trigger embarrassment, and to retrospectively engage in social repair work after an inappropriate action: Blushing, apologies and amends signal that the action was an unintentional mishap and that the individual can be trusted to be otherwise competent and mindful of social norms ([16], pp. 113-114).

A central dimension regulated by such situational norms is "the structure of involvement in the situation" ([14], p. 193): who may legitimately open, join, leave, or close what shared focus of attention and action under what conditions; how deeply attentively absorbed one may get in this focus; and how strongly emotionally involved one may get in it. As social creatures, we have a natural propensity to get "engrossed" or unselfconsciously lost in joint foci of attention, action, and emotion ([17], p. 35; [19], p. 346). Furthermore, involvement is socially contagious: in observing one another, we spiral each other out of it by becoming mutually self-consciousness of our lack of involvement, or spiral each other into mutual engrossment ([12], pp. 243-244; [17], pp. 38-44). This experience of "joint spontaneous involvement" ([15], p. 113), prototypical in the "crowd madness" of soccer fans at a match, is a central source of social cohesion and mobilization – hence the need for societies to tightly regulate it.

Together, embarrassment and involvement generate what Goffman calls "interaction tension" ([12], pp. 243-257, [14], pp. 38-41). Whenever we interact with others, things tend to feel either "flowing smoothly" or "awkward" and "dragging". This experience, Goffman holds, arises from the degree to which participants are able to produce a stream of interaction that effortlessly excites and binds joint involvement. ([12], pp. 243-244) The normal state of affairs in everyday life is "dysphoric tension": because there is usually "some discrepancy between obligatory involvements and spontaneous ones" ([14], p. 40), actors have to engage in constant effortful and unpleasant self-monitoring and

self-regulation to fit their involvement into the demands of the situation and prevent embarrassments. This is especially the case for emotion and emotion display: We have to show proper excitement over a friend's fortune, hide boredom at a public event, suppress anger at an impolite passer-by and laughter at a church service. "Flooding out" ([14], p. 62; [19], pp. 375-376) describes the embarrassing situation where people are unable to contain their emotional responses, bursting into uncontrolled laughter, tears, or rage. In the rare case that the actors' spontaneous needs, wants, and interests align with the proprieties of the situation, they can allow themselves to get engrossed, to stop reflexively monitoring and controlling their attention, action, and emotion ([19], p. 378). The resultant positive, pleasurable experience is "euphoric" ease ([14], p. 38).

In gaming, "euphoric interaction is relatively often achieved: gaming is often fun" ([14], p. 39). This is the case because gaming encounters unite games, purpose-built to be "engrossables" ([19], p. 57) that spontaneously attract and bind joint involvement, with the situational norms of gaming encounters which allow (and demand) deep involvement in gameplay. That is, gameplay is *not* enjoyable because it features somehow "less" norms for emotional involvement than other situations. Rather, it allows and disallows specific *kinds* of emotion and emotion display, and is designed to make participants frequently spontaneously experience and want to express *just these* emotions such that the existence of norms – in the form of effortful self-control or embarrassment – disappears from awareness. The paradox of gameplay is that it is "shared, obligatory, spontaneous involvement." ([14], p. 39) Fun or euphoric ease arises when obligatory norms align with spontaneous wants, not when norms are absent.

Following the early work of Goffman and Hochschild [32], a rich strand of symbolic interactionist sociology has since explored how groups reproduce a shared emotional culture of "feeling rules" for different roles and situations, and how individuals have to engage in "emotion work" to fit their experience and action into these [31,33]. Goffman's theory of the sociality of emotional involvement has found a similar uptake [3,25]. Yet to our knowledge, there hasn't been empirical work on the specific feeling rules and emotion work of leisurely video game play. And while Goffman's "Fun in Games" figures in sociological accounts of gameplay [8], its theory of fun as euphoric ease has remained untested. In the course of a larger qualitative interview study on the social norms of video game play among German adult gamers, we came across multiple player reports that aligned with but also qualified Goffman's theory, specifically with regard to emotional involvement. As we pursued an open, grounded theory approach, this emergent network of concepts became part of the larger interviewing, sampling, and coding strategy, even though it was not the focal point of the overall study. Hence, for the purposes of the present study, we reanalyzed the data with an explicit focus on interaction tension and emotional involvement.

## 3. METHOD

In the overarching study, we combined episodic interviews [10] with directed qualitative content analysis [20]. We construed an initial semi-structured interview script with key aspects of situational frames taken from Goffmanian frame analysis [19]: settings, objects, roles, internal organization, metacommunication, attention, emotion, rules for action and communication, and situational boundaries. For each aspect, we invited participants to report biographical incidents they considered "prototypical" for leisurely gameplay, and incidents where norms regarding that aspect were breached.

We initially recruited participants who engaged in “canonical” leisurely gameplay as well as “atypical” forms such as e-sports and gameplay-as-work performed by game journalists, designers, and researchers. Our rationale was that actively encouraging participants to compare and contrast memories of canonical and atypical gameplay situations would foreground otherwise taken-for-granted norms of leisurely gameplay. We also aimed to maximize diversity in participants’ age, gender, and experience across different game genres, devices, and social textures in our initial interviewing sample.

To ensure openness and empirical grounding of our concepts, we followed the grounded theory principles of constant comparison and theoretical sampling [4]: we gathered and coded data in parallel, comparing each new datum against existing concepts, revising, refining, or adding concepts as required by the data, also revising the interview script and choosing new participants based on emerging new questions and hypotheses until we reached theoretical saturation [4], that is, until new data did not force revision of the concepts. We conducted 19 interviews with an average length of 90 minutes until we reached saturation, which matches previous findings that about 90% code saturation is achieved around 12 interviews [30]. In sum, we collected about 1,900 minutes of audio recordings together with field notes and participant illustrations of their various gameplay settings. All interviews were transcribed and all material was coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (version 10.0).

For the present paper, we re-analyzed our data, initially starting with 222 passages coded for “emotion” and “interaction tension” in the original study, building a new code set for the purposes of this analysis. The following interview excerpts have been translated from the German original, which is accessible together with transcription conventions in [8].

## 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Popular media images like Phillip Toledano’s photography series “Gamers” [24] suggest that gameplay is intensely emotional, with players so deeply engrossed that they lose any conscious poise, their faces contorted in pure expressions of joy, surprise, anger, or frustration. Our interview data suggests the opposite: Players reported that they regularly manage their emotions during gameplay, revealing a rich landscape of considerations and circumstances attenuating what emotion to display how intensely when.

### 4.1 The Regulation of Emotion (Display)

On the one hand, intense emotion and emotion display is indeed understood to be a normal part of video gaming, especially if players agree to play competitively against each other. Even aggressive emoting that would be completely inappropriate in e.g. normal conversation is par for the course because the frame of a gaming encounter earmarks it as “non-serious”, not targeted at the actual biographical person of the other. Says one player:

“Anger, aggression when you’re playing video games together with, (2s) via network, via Internet, (3s) those are all things accompanying gameplay, that are often also playful. (...) Nothing that is wrong or so.”

Interviewer: “Any situation, where you, when you say frustration or aggression, do you remember a situation where someone took that the wrong way?”

Player: “\*No\*, no, no. That’s with the people with whom I’ve played up to now, so that they (3s) take that in a way, that it shows me, they see that similarly. Evaluate that in the same way, are apparently (2s) socialized similarly, know that that’s part of

gaming and not meant in a malign manner, is even part of the whole.” (P4/600-608)

Then again, even aggression display has limits of propriety. As one member of an online shooter clan noted, because “younger players” (he himself was above 30) would engage in too aggressive language (“flaming”), his clan decided to not allow anyone below the age of 23 to join.

As suggested by Goffman, players reported involvement and dis-involvement to be socially contagious, especially in cooperative multiplayer games, wherefore they engaged (and expected each other to engage) in practices of mutual in-group *uptalking* and out-group *downtalking* (trashing, teasing, taunting) to stoke arousal. Players considered showing a minimum degree of emotional involvement to be a positive demand of gaming encounters. In the words of one:

“Yes, so in a group game, in a group game it is expected that you show elation when you have achieved something, somehow. That is, you should show that then. (3s) You should certainly also be appropriately frustrated when something doesn’t work, and not say: <<Ahh, who cares.>> And then, not in online games, but in group situations like with the Kinect, there it’s certainly also the case that you should appropriately be happy for somebody else, if somebody made a new high score, because that’s certainly socially, like, desired.” (P2/260)

Just as displayed involvement is contagious, to display complete emotional disinvestment in gameplay would diminish the experience for the others. One would become a spoilsport making the others self-consciously aware of their own now potentially inappropriate ‘over’-involvement in a ‘silly’ game, or their lack of regard for the spoilsport’s own lack of enjoyment.

Similarly, entailed in the gaming norms to be a “good winner” and “good loser” is to show measured-but-not-excessive involvement in one’s victory or loss: One should visibly enjoy one’s victory – but watch out that one’s display does not hurt the losers’ feelings. As a loser, although one should put visible effort into winning until the last moment, when the game outcome is resolved, one should congratulate the winner and immediately stop minding the fact that one has lost. Says one player:

“If you lose, you have to accept that and shouldn’t play the offended, but continue to grin and bear it, stand above it. And a winner shouldn’t celebrate too boisterously that he won.” (P9/125)

Thus, being a “sore loser” means letting one’s emotion display impinge on the others, as this player put it:

“No, you are a sore loser if you, if you burden the others with your own frustration. That means, when you vent your anger and, and, and you’re in a sour mood and that becomes a burden for the others. So otherwise, I mean, that you get angry when you lose, that’s alright. That’s normal. You play in order to win and not to lose. But when you then become annoying for the others, because you get into a sour mood or say: <<I don’t want to play anymore>> or are even offended... then, then I find that a sore loser.” (P17/444)

In the same way, players noted that they would tone down their own celebrations of success or taunting of others’ failures if they noticed that this might ‘seriously’ hurt an other – again making sure that emotion display maintains proper regard to the other:

“For example, we had, let’s say, when a player from my team, what also happened, for instance had just broken up with his girlfriend. Then you’re a little down, or you’re angry. And then, for instance, you should, when you notice that, shouldn’t taunt him on top of that.” (P15/327)

Gaming encounters provide a legitimate stage for intense emotion and emotion display. Apart from showing proper emotional involvement and watching out for the other player’s enjoyment, a third norm we found is that while one is allowed to have and show intense feelings, one has to modulate their display in such way that it can still be credibly interpreted by others as disinvested, ‘not-serious’ involvement one can easily detach from: self but not self. Emotional intensity is allowed to the extent that players display the capacity to immediately contain it again – that is, be a trustworthy, rational social actor. This signaling is usually achieved through laughter, humor, or irony marks. A real norm breach occurs if a player cannot convincingly disinvest his or her biographical self from her player role in the gaming encounter. Here is how one player put into words his unease about a colleague that breached that norm:

“If somebody, who sees that differently, and for that person it’s extremely important, and he says: <<That is \*me\* who has advanced here>>, then that’s something I don’t understand. If he also signals happiness and says: <<Great.>> And for me it doesn’t have just the appearance anymore, or just the: <<I had a success in the game and I’m proud that I achieved a certain point in the game, that is part of the game and I made another level.>> No, if the other says: <<I grew \*myself\* as a person>>, because he achieved something in the game. And this mixing, if I hear real floodings of emotion or something like that, that really isn’t necessary.” (P4/484)

Interestingly, social bonds seemed to lower the boundaries of socially demanded emotion regulation, because then others are able to interpret the player’s emotion display in the total context of their previous interactions, instead of considering it strange. As one player observed, if she plays with friends,

“Getting a bit upset is okay. Also to give the other a bit, I also find it okay, if you just pulled the ball between his legs and he, or you had a wonderful goal against him, and then provoke him naughtily. (3s) But that you only do with friends. So I don’t think that I would like that, if I would stand at a console in the supermarket, or at the Media Markt [a German retail chain for electronics] or somewhere, and play against someone unknown there, then, then I might show him my triumph, but, but I don’t let him feel, that he is an asshole. Or that I just, let’s say that I just took him for a ride. Instead I just show him that I won, I’m happy about that, and showing happiness is okay then. But I believe it is, in, this, it’s like a social norm: So I think, when I, with friends I can be a bit more rough, especially if I know them a little longer. With, with unknown people I’m a bit more restrained, I think.” (P7/231-237)

Finally, especially players with a more intense gaming biography, whose biographical self is invested in their identity as a skilled gamer, would make a point of maintaining gameworthy poise. As one player noted, even though he might feel “hatred” towards another player beating him repeatedly, he would not reveal that:

“so when I’m continually killed by the same player, then you effectively develop such a kind of hatred. But that’s not like I would have something against that human being personally, but simply against the way he plays. So tha- that’s effectively also an

admission that you are inferior. (3s) But that I would (2s) wouldn’t say.”

Interviewer: “What kind of reaction do you show instead?”

Player: “Nothing.”

Interviewer: “Nothing.”

Player: “No, that’s really. There I completely contain myself. Because that, that is, as I said, such a matter of honor.” (P5-1/187-191)

Elsewhere [15], Goffman argues that in modern societies, “action” – safe, pseudo-consequential activities like gambling, extreme sports or watching action movies – serves as a legitimate social stage especially for men to display socially valued “character”: cool, poise, and determination in the face of fate. The safe risk of (competitive) gameplay may function as one such stage.

In summary, three overarching norms seem to regulate emotion display in leisurely video game play: First, one should pay proper regard to the others’ selves by ensuring that one’s emotive expressions do not seriously hurt their feelings or are (mis)construed as literal aggression or malign intent. Second, one should pay proper regard to the others’ enjoyment by ensuring that one’s displayed involvement supports and amplifies rather than derails theirs. Third, one should ensure that one’s own biographical self remains unspoilt: one must credibly maintain the impression that one is capable of containing emotions elicited by gameplay and not let them spill over into one’s social life beyond the game. All three norms hinge to a large extent on the ability to credibly display intense emotion while at the same time credibly displaying that these emotions are not ‘meant’ literally. Inappropriate “flooding out” occurs where players are not able to maintain this impression of *disinvolved involvement* anymore. These observations mesh well with Goffman’s general account of involvement regulation. So what about his specific theory of enjoyment: euphoric ease?

## 4.2 The Absent Presence of Euphoric Ease

When probed to retell memories of enjoyment or typical emotions in video game play, players reported a broad range of experiences well-familiar to enjoyment researchers [1]: competence, arousal and suspense, curiosity, relatedness, relaxation, social connection, success, and the like. Interestingly, none of their memories of positive experience were connected to the perceived *absence* of emotional self-regulation or worrying about embarrassment due to failed emotion work. Conversely, players could easily produce memories where the presence of perceived social norms impeding their spontaneously desired emotion and emotion display would impede their enjoyment. Such moments came with a general diminished intensity of emotion, and the experience that one cannot let oneself get fully engrossed in gameplay. Here is how one player described the unpleasantness of having to regulate his emotions when he plays in a train cabin under the eyes of others:

“Well, it’s simply distracting. So although, well, I am somehow in flow, in quotation marks, and immersed and in there, so I still catch myself as I am then still somehow, as I::: can’t focus one the game one hundred percent” (P10/403)

Interestingly, the only report describing a *positive* experiential quality connected to the *absence* of interaction tension pertains to solitary play. As one game designer noted, when playing alone at home, she would experience a positive sense of freedom not felt when playing with friends or at the office in order to analyze competitor games. She felt

“Freedom I would also say, certainly in the private context, because there I can simply show all emotions that I develop when I

play this game. And that I of course don't have when I'm sitting in the office. That's not a feeling of freedom. I would say, if I had the opportunity to play Battlefield in the office, I would enjoy it less because I then don't have this feeling of freedom."

Interviewer: "Is that experience of freedom also present when you play together with several people on your couch?"

Player: "Y:::, to a certain extent it is, yes, but there the consideration for the friends dominates, for the people with whom I'm sitting there. So then it's less the case, that I focus on the game and say: <<I am now, now I am free and can determine this.>> Instead it's also more about me being the host, and being a guest of somebody and still take regard of that." (P9/309-311)

As the player put it in another context:

"So if I feel unobserved, in my private rooms, then I can show any emotion, because there would be nothing inappropriate in doing so, because I wouldn't offend anyone with it. At most I would offend myself ((laughs))." (P9/225)

This observation repeats itself across interviews: Players reported a complete absence of perceived demands of emotion regulation when they would play solitarily:

Interviewer: "((When you're playing on the iPad, are)) there any feelings that one should better control, not show openly?"

Player: "No. There I am by myself. I have no contact with others and when I don't want to anymore, I stop." (P17/738-740)

We can see that contrary to Goffman's suggestion, euphoric ease as the absence of friction between spontaneous wants and social demands is usually not a positive figure in video game play experience (or at least, memories thereof). However, it still seems to play a significant role in gameplay enjoyment, only as a conditional 'hygiene factor' that has to be (and apparently often is) present for other, remembered positive experiences to be able to come to the fore. Second, Goffman's own focus on face-to-face interaction and the multiplayer games of his days led him to overlook *solitary gameplay* as a type of gaming encounter with the least dysphoric tension because there are no response-present others to take into regard. This matches the psychological finding that people feel less embarrassed about situational mishaps when they perceive no audience present able to observe and judge their behavior [21]. Which in turn matches the observation that players also felt little need to regulate their emotion when they played anonymously online:

Interviewer: "How is it when you're playing online? Is it the same?"

Player: "There you get agitated... There you usually sit alone here and then you get even more, so I some- times get loud, or something. But ((puffs))."

Interviewer: "So while you're in front, while you play [you work yourself-]"

Player: "[Yes, exactly,] while I play. Yes (3s) what do I know, you say <<Shit hobo!>>, or something, and... but he doesn't, he doesn't hear it then. So it's not like he would notice it, or so. But yes, so there it's not so..."

Interviewer: "And that would not happen when you're playing with friends on your couch?"

Player: "Yes, I think I wouldn't insult them. (...)"

Interviewer: "Okay. But, would you, when you sit with your friends on a table, get upset as well? So?"

Player: "Yes, you get upset as well. Sure. But that's then::, yes, that's then not as permanent and not as loudly. So if you sit alone here, then you more often let your feelings run free, than if you sit

together with a group or so, and get upset about something." (P19/89-96)

In short, both solitary and anonymous online gameplay lack a response-present audience of to-be-regarded others, lowering the demands of emotion regulation. Which brings us to a second amendment to Goffman's initial phrasing of interaction tension.

### 4.3 A Room of One's Own: Socio-Material Preconditions

When Goffman penned "Fun in Games", the social reality of gameplay he reported on was one of board and card games played and home or in casinos. However, laptops, smartphones and other mobile gaming devices have dislocated game play from such dedicated gaming settings and transposed them into other, public settings dedicated to other activities. As such, mobile and pervasive games present an almost natural 'breaching experiment,' disrupting standing social practices and constellations to foreground the previously taken-for-granted. What they reveal is that the lack of a potentially disapproving and regard-demanding audience is no simple given of solitary gaming. Rather, it is a socio-material accomplishment, as the following excerpt shows:

Interviewer: "If you play a mobile game, is there, in comparison to playing at home alone in front of the console, is there a difference in what emotions you can or are allowed to express?"

Player: "Since I am then mostly in a public surrounding, loud screaming or throwing that thing in the corner are not an option. Although you would really want to do it, you have to restrain yourself a bit there and, let's put it this way, appear a bit more suited for public." (P7/ 269-271)

Solitary video game play in not gaming-dedicated settings is problematic on two accounts. Firstly, it potentially breaches the social norms of the prevailing situation. Again, to be considered a trustworthy, benign social actor and not embarrass oneself, one has to render one's behavior appropriate and even more basically, *intelligible* in the given context. As one player noted, when he played *StarCraft* online on his laptop communicating with his team members via VoIP in his mother's kitchen, he would feel embarrassment when his mother entered the room, who did not know the game:

"if somebody, somebody who has now clue about, no view of the game and hears me talking. So that's somehow awkward for me, because somebody who doesn't know what I'm doing just hears these weird, cryptic communicative lumps of language from me." (P10/221-237)

In dedicated 'gaming grounds' like casinos or arcade halls, gaming behavior is appropriate and expected: provide a context for making intelligible behavior that would be atypical thus 'strange' in other contexts.

Second, it is taken for granted but significant that leisurely video game play, according to the interviewed players, predominantly takes place in their private bedroom or living room at home. This social place not only comes with the social license to be left alone and unobserved (formalized in many country's privacy laws): the "furnished frame" ([16], p. 284) of the house also provides a physical shielding from the looks (and thus, judgments and regard demands) of passing onlookers. As the same player continues, he also attempts to play games on his laptop when travelling on train. However, he still found this a suboptimal place because the presence of others kept him from fully letting himself immerse in the game. To reduce this issue, he would create a physical shielding

from the views of other passengers by placing himself in a corner of the cabin where he would not be easily seen:

“I’m somebody who then also enjoys the, the, the protection of your, your own, your own row of seats. Also as, as a form of blinds. (...) Most importantly, that I have such, such a little two-two seat row for myself. If there’s like a high seat before and behind me. And there, well I (4s), so well, even there I would::: if I would, like, play a bit more frequently there, then maybe I wouldn’t be like, that I would say to myself, okay, now I suppress emotions here. But I still would not laugh out loud.” (P10/361-363)

To be sure, players did report engaging in gameplay with mobile devices in public spaces. However, this was reported only for transit or waiting settings (on trains, subways, airplanes, at a doctor’s waiting room), or in recreational settings like hotel beds, deck chairs next to hotel swimming pools, or cafés. What unites both types of settings is that individual attentive disengagement from the wider situation and engagement in a private, time-filling “subordinate involvement” ([14], p. 51) like newspaper reading or gaming is considered appropriate. You can play a mobile game on a subway without raising legitimate eyebrows, but not during class, or at least there you have to make an effort to appear to hide it and show remorse when caught.

Summing up, the interview data indicated two preconditions for euphoric ease in video game play: that it takes place in a setting where video game play (and the emotion display it engenders and demands) is socially legitimate and expected, and/or in a setting where players are physically shielded from the eyes of potentially uninitiated, disapproving others. As gaming arcades and casinos show, the two usually go together: Even where we play games in semi-public places, we do so to an ‘initiated’ public expected to share or at least know and respect the collective intention to engage in gaming, physically shielded from a public-at-large.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper, we analyzed data from a qualitative interview study on social norms of emotion and emotion display in video game play among German adult gamers to probe Goffman’s theory of gameplay enjoyment as euphoric ease. Gaming encounters, he posited, present us with the paradox of obligatory spontaneous involvement. Because games are designed as “engrossables” ([19], p. 57), eliciting spontaneous involvement, and because the social norms of gaming allow and demand deep involvement, spontaneous and socially demanded involvement often align in leisurely gameplay, such that the negative experience of effortful self-control falls away and the positive experience of effortless engrossment and ease emerge.

In line with Goffman’s broader account of the interaction order, interviewed players reported a rich and nuanced set of social norms for emotion (display) observed in video game play, paying proper symbolic regards to their own self as well as the self and enjoyment of co-present others: Emotion display should support not detract from the other players’ enjoyment; it should not seriously hurt the others’ feelings or be (mis)construed as literal aggression; and it should maintain that one is capable of keeping gameplay emotions separate from one’s biographical self and social life beyond the gameplay encounter. That is, gameplay shows a paradoxical form of *disinvolved involvement*: it is allowed to be emotionally serious to the degree that it can be credibly signaled to not be taken seriously.

Analysis furthermore suggested three amendments to Goffman’s theory. First, euphoric ease – the absence of interaction tension – is less a positive figure of player experience than a negative ground, a hygiene factor of game enjoyment. Second, solitary gameplay, vastly facilitated by computers as opponents [5], is the type of gaming encounter most free from interaction tension, and potentially enjoyable because of that: it is the only instance for which players reported the freedom from social demands as a positive experience of its own. Third, two important socio-material components of (solitary) gaming encounters affording euphoric ease are a wider social setting in which gameplay, gameplay emotion, and its display are legitimate, and a physical setting that shields from potentially disapproving, regard-demanding others.

## 5.1 Limitations

As a qualitative study with a small and culturally homogenous sample, the present study cannot (and does not want to) make claims toward broad generalizability, especially since social norms of conduct and forms of embarrassment are strongly localized in cultures [21]. It can also not claim reliability in any statistical sense, though in the qualitative sense that data collection, transcription, and analyses were transparently documented [11]. The purpose of the present paper was not to test, but to empirically ground and refine Goffman’s theory of interaction tension with regard to emotion regulation in video game play. The presented account is indeed grounded in that it is congruent with and can explain all collected data. One important limitation here is that as a pure data re-analysis, we did not engage in continued data collection and analysis to the point of theoretical saturation for the focal question of this present paper.

## 5.2 Contextualization

Our findings on the existence of feeling rules and emotion work in video game play encounters are in line with contemporary sociological research on the matter [31,33], as is the observation that emotion (display) in video game play can be socially contagious [3,25]. The observation that co-present others actualize social norms and thus, self-monitoring and self-regulation is likewise in line with findings in the social psychology of embarrassment [21]. Goffman’s multidimensional concept of involvement is obviously out of sync and thus needs alignment with contemporary research on immersion and involvement (e.g., [2,29]) – something that is outside the scope of this paper. Even so, his theory – and the observations presented here – have many promising connections to current game enjoyment research, first and foremost mood management theory (MMT) and flow theory (FT).

MMT argues that people selectively attend to media to improve their mood, amongst other aspects media with *intervention potential*, that is, the ability to absorb attention such that no cognitive resources are left to ruminate on negative thoughts [28]. Games are seen as a prime example of highly absorbing and arousing media [28]. Csikszentmihalyi’s original rendition of FT similarly argues that the human mind evolved to naturally drift towards (unenjoyable but adaptive) worry and cognitive disorder [6]. “Flow” describes an “optimal state” of experience where the mind is ordered and worry-free because it is fully absorbed. Activities like gameplay are flow-inducing because they give the mind a ready structure as well as a taxing-but-attainable challenges and continuous action-feedback loops that absorb cognition [6].

As can be seen, Goffman, MMT and FT all hold that one aspect of (gameplay) enjoyment is the absence of negative experiences

(self-consciousness, effortful self-regulation, and thwarted interests, worry, disorder) entailed in an absorbed attention. For MMT and FT, involvement actively suppresses or reduces negative experience; for Goffman, socially misaligned involvement causes it. In this, Goffman not so much contradicts as complements the individualistic models of MMT and FT with a social dimension: only if well-designed games stoke arousal and bind attention *and that form of arousal and attention is permissible in the given context* does full absorption or flow occur. Otherwise, processes of regulating them to fit social demands take away from full involvement.

This leaves the interesting question how to psychologically account for what makes interaction tension unenjoyable. One obvious candidate mechanism would be cognitive dissonance [9]; another, goal conflict [26]. Third, self-regulation may involve a necessary constant attention switching between main task and self-regulation, reducing full attentive absorption. Fourth, self-regulation may itself be a form of worry that comes with negative affect. A fifth contender, closer to current game enjoyment research, is self-determination as conceptualized in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [7]. Following SDT, when people perceive themselves to act autonomously, self-determinedly, in congruence with their own goals, values, identity, and spontaneous interests, they satisfy a basic psychological need for autonomy, which is experienced as enjoyable [7]. This meshes with the fact that players described the absence of interaction tension as “freedom”. In contrast, if people perceive themselves to act inautonomously, controlled and coerced by either external rewards and punishments or internalized social demands, this thwarts the need for autonomy, generating unenjoyable experiences of pressure and unwillingness [7] – exactly what Goffman described as “dysphoric tension.” What his accounts adds is again the social dimension, understanding autonomy and control experiences as a function – a “euphoria function” ([17], p. 40) of both individual dispositions and situational norms.

One immediate task for future work is thus to not just experimentally validate the presented findings, but to tease out the exact psychological processes mediating between the mismatch of desired and appropriate involvement and experienced “interaction tension”. Another is to specify our findings for different game genres, gaming modes, and groups [8]: What are the feeling rules of different cultures and communities? Does competitive Chess play differ from competitive e-sports differ from casual gaming?

### 5.3 Outlook

If research has revealed one thing, then that “the fun in games” is not a solitary thing, but rather many things to many people [1], a complex multitude of sometimes interweaving, sometimes separate processes and phenomena. Just like the field of motivational psychology from which it draws, game enjoyment research should embrace this post-paradigmatic plurality ([23], p. 45). In this vein, this paper intended to explore but one sub-process of the complex mesh that is gameplay. In so doing, we hope to encourage future research into two under-explored dimensions of gameplay enjoyment: *social* processes, and ‘absent negatives’ or hygiene factors. By and large, gameplay enjoyment research has used psychological theories to study solitary gameplay in laboratory experiments. An artifact of this research paradigm is that social dimensions of gameplay enjoyment have not come into view – at most in the shape of co-present others supporting social presence and relatedness needs [34,35]. Importantly, research has missed that solitary gameplay is *itself* a specific and consequential social setting: The very fact *that* others are absent, and *legitimately* so, holds social

significance, affects experience and behavior. Just like the players cited in these pages had difficulty actively recalling the absence of interaction tension, so we as researchers sometimes have difficulty seeing the obvious and absent in our research paradigms. One enduring promise of sociology is to make the elusive obvious visible, and give voice to the absent. Interaction tension is certainly only the first in a long list of overlooked game enjoyment phenomena it might bring into view for us.

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