

ENHANCING ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION THROUGH THE PLAYER JOURNEY

Valentin DOROGAN¹
Tudor MIC²

ABSTRACT:

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION IS A VERY IMPORTANT PROCESS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THAT HAS PROFOUND IMPACT ON BOTH THE EFFICIENCY OF THE ORGANIZATION AND THE WELLBEING OF ITS MEMBERS. IN THIS PAPER WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION, AT WHAT VIDEO GAMES USE AS EQUIVALENT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION, THE PLAYER JOURNEY, AND AT WHAT MAKES A GAME FUN. WE TRY TO IDENTIFY THE MOST USED GAME MECHANICS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAYER JOURNEY BY STUDYING SOME OF THE BEST VIDEO GAMES ON THE MARKET. WE APPLY INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH ON DATA COLLECTED FROM 60 VIDEO GAMES BY OBSERVING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPECIFIC GAME MECHANICS AND TYPES OF FUN THROUGHOUT THE PHASES OF THE PLAYER JOURNEY. WE IDENTIFY THE MAIN ASPECTS THAT MAKE A SUCCESSFUL PLAYER JOURNEY AND USE THEM TO PROPOSE A STARTING POINT IN CREATING PRINCIPLES FOR ENHANCING THE EFFICIENCY OF ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION.

KEY WORDS: ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION, THE PLAYER JOURNEY, GAME MECHANICS, WORK, MOTIVATION

INTRODUCTION

Society nowadays is becoming more mobile than in the past and this particular characteristic changes a lot of the ongoing dynamics between different social aspects. One such change is in the way we choose and change our professional career. These days it is not uncommon to choose one job just to realize it doesn't fulfill our personal desires and thus leading to a search for a different job. With the start of each job the new employee has to adapt to the specifics of the hiring organization. This process is known as organizational socialization and is defined as the "process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member"³. The success of this process directly determines the speed at which the newcomer becomes a full member and his

¹ Conf. Dr., Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, valentin.zaha@gmail.com

² Phd student, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, tudormic@yahoo.com

³ Meryl R. Louis, "Surprise and sense making: what newcomers experience in entering unfamiliar organizational settings," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25 (1980): 229-30

effectiveness inside the company, as well as (and not limited to) the newcomer's perception of the organization and the level of personal involvement in organizational activities.

In this paper we take a look at what strategies video games and organizations use to adapt new people to their system and what these strategies have in common. We also look at what fun means for video games and their players, and we try to present a theoretical starting point to improving the process of organizational socialization by studying the key mechanics used in video games and intersecting these mechanics with those applied in organizational socialization.

THE COMMON GROUND

Organizational socialization is generally divided into three phases: “anticipatory socialization, encounter, and metamorphosis”⁴. In short, anticipatory socialization refers to the socialization that takes place before entering the organization and it also considers the introduction into the occupation. Encounter is the phase when the person first enters the organizational context and interacts for the first time with new elements and metamorphosis is the moment when the new employee is considered to have “finished” the socialization process. As a side note, the relationship between the member and the organization is always dynamic because “there is always some measure of flux and uncertainty in employees’ understandings of organizational role and culture”⁵.

While the notion of game is part of their title, video games are very complex products. It's an oversimplification to just call them games. They are structured and designed in order to give players experiences. Just like organizations, video games also have to “socialize” their player in order to adapt them to the game. Games must be able to communicate the rules, the possible actions, the narrative, motivations, etc. so, to no surprise, games also have a socialization process which is called “The Player Journey”⁶. Kevin Werbach divided this process into 3 phases: *Onboarding*, *Scaffolding*, and *Pathways to Mastery*. Onboarding is the phase in which the player becomes familiar with the main aspects of the game, the rules, the possible actions, types of consequences, the narrative, important characters, etc. In scaffolding players use what they were presented in onboarding to try and overcome more complex problems or events and to get even more familiar with the game mechanics and details. The final phase, mastery, is where the players know almost all there is to know about the game, where they “conquer” the game.

The purpose of the onboarding phase together with the scaffolding phase is very similar to that of the encounter phase in organizational socialization, and the mastery phase with the metamorphosis phase. We purposely left out the anticipatory socialization phase since its role in adapting the newcomer to the organization is very limited and is present mostly only during the employment interview. Eisenberg et al. (2009) note that the expectations that individuals develop during the interview are not realistic due to the fact that the interviewer focuses on the positive sides of the job and organization.

THE FUN FACTOR

While games are complex designed experiences, it is well known that their allure is the entertainment value, the fun. As opposed to these, working in organizations is a serious matter that requires a lot of responsibility. There is a lot of recent research that interviews frequent players of hit games and their results show that common conceptions about games

⁴ Katherine Miller, *Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes*, Sixth Edition (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2011), 124.

⁵ Miller, *Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes*, 126

⁶ Kevin Werbach, “Gamification”, accessed August 27, 2012, <https://www.coursera.org/course/gamification>

and fun are not entirely real. For example, Nick Yee's research shows that "video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers. And the work being performed in video games is increasingly similar to actual work in business corporations."⁷ This leads to a very interesting phenomenon: there is a lot of time invested working in virtual games without any real world reward (salary), voluntarily. This begs to the questions: What is fun in video games? How can games socialize their players to do in-game work using this fun?

In a qualitative research of emotions in video games, Nicole Lazzaro identified 4 types of fun found across video games: easy fun, hard fun, people fun, and serious fun⁸. Easy fun that is simple, non-taxing, casual and light, about the small things, exploration. Its opposite is hard fun, challenges, problem solving, completion, overcoming obstacles, it represents accomplishment. People fun is the fun that comes from interaction with others, it requires other people, it can involve competition and/or teamwork and it can be easy fun and/or hard fun. Serious fun is that type of fun that comes out of doing meaningful things for something greater than the player (the community, the environment, family, etc.) and meaningful things for the player so it has a strong subjective nature. These are important for us because they take into account that different people find different things fun and respond in different ways when interacting with the same mechanics or elements. It also allows us to pinpoint what exactly engages players in the different phases of the player journey.

OUR STUDY

We studied the player journey in 60 successful games to identify the way they managed to socialize their players and motivate them to reach the state of mastery. The selection criteria of the games were: They had to be critically acclaimed (have a review score above 70% in main review outlets). The reason for this was that like any other designed experience games can be a good product or a less than good product. By analyzing only the good games it's more likely to identify efficient socialization techniques. However, it's important to note that we acknowledge the fact that in a complex product, such as a video game, there are a lot of elements that can make or break the game, so a less than good video game can have very well designed socialization techniques, but doesn't meet our criteria due to other aspects. The second selection criterion was that they had to be from all genre. While a lot of game mechanics and dynamics are universal, there are differences between game genre and most important is the fact that different players play different game types. The socialization mechanics used in casual social games are less complex than those used in hardcore games. The games studied were: Action games, Adventure games, Role-playing games, Simulation games, Strategy games, and Puzzle games. The third criterion was the platform used for the games. We took into account 5 platforms: PC, Mobile, PlayStation, Xbox, and Browser-Based. The main reason for this criterion was thoroughness since its overall impact on our study is non-existent. While mechanics don't really differ from platform to platform, especially PC games and Console games (PlayStation and Xbox), they do differ in implementation when taking account of Mobile games due to the hardware limitations of the platform (no keyboard or mouse). The fourth and last criterion was the game age. Studied games had to be no older than 5 years. Just like any field, video games evolve over time and the more recent they are, the better the design and structure thus they can offer better insight.

⁷ Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun: How Video Game Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play," *Games and Culture* 1 (2006): 70, accessed October 2, 2013, doi: 10.1177/1555412005281819.

⁸ Nicole Lazzaro, "Why We Play Games: Four Keys to More Emotion Without Story", accessed September 20, 2013, http://xeodesign.com/xeodesign_whyweplaygames.pdf

We chose 10 games for each genre to study, for a total of 60, in order to look for the mechanics and dynamics that make up the socialization process in the player journey. While looking for these particular elements we also took into account the four types of fun and their role and position in the whole socialization process, from the start until the end. We divided the research into three distinct phases, to account for each phase of the player journey: onboarding, scaffolding and pathway to mastery.

RESEARCH RESULTS

During our search for the game mechanics in the three different phases we discovered that the mechanics used in onboarding carry to scaffolding with little to no modification in their structure but with considerable changes in complexity or difficulty. The same is true for the mastery phase. For example, while in onboarding it is very easy to reach a certain level or get a certain bonus, in scaffolding it takes more time or resources to get another level or another bonus. This trend carries to the mastery phase. The mechanics, level and bonus don't change, their requirements do. Due to this reason the study of game mechanics and their presence is not divided into the three phases of the player journey, but since the difficulty changes so does the fun factor and it's important to evaluate how it changes from the onboarding to the mastery phase.

We looked for all the present game mechanics during the onboarding, scaffolding, and mastery phase in all 60 games. We divided the research based on game type and we counted in how many games of the same genre the same mechanic was encountered. The results are presented in (table no. 1).

Table 1. Repartition of game mechanic over game genres.
The number of games that have the specified mechanic is expressed as %.

Game mechanic	Action	Role-playing	Strategy	Simulation	Adventure	Puzzle
Achievements	40%	80%	50%	60%	60%	40%
Bonuses	30%	70%	40%	60%	30%	80%
Cascading Information Theory	60%	100%	100%	80%	80%	100%
Discovery	100%	100%	100%	80%	100%	80%
Epic Meaning	100%	100%	80%	20%	100%	20%
Levels	60%	100%	100%	70%	30%	100%
Loss Aversion	50%	80%	100%	60%	60%	30%
Ownership	20%	100%	80%	80%	30%	30%
Progression	100%	100%	100%	80%	100%	100%
Quests/Goals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Resource Management	100%	100%	100%	60%	40%	30%

Before interpreting the results, it's important to note that we did not take into consideration the PBL triad (points, badges and leaderboards). They are elements that can be used to express other game mechanics and the goal was to determine the most used mechanics. It's also important to note that these are, by all means, not all the game mechanics

that exist in the world of game design and not the only mechanics present in the entire game. They are the most influential mechanics during the player journey.

As we previously mentioned, the mechanics don't change in structure during the first two phases which leads us to a very important conclusion. *Consistency* in types of actions plays an important role in allowing the player to adapt to the novelty of the game and, with the same tools he is presented at the very beginning, reach a higher level of dexterity within the boundaries of the game. By not changing the core mechanics the player is not put in a position in which he is forced to abandon the previous experiences and adapt to a whole new set of rules.

By looking at the repartition of mechanics in the studied games we can identify several aspects of the player journey. The first mechanic which is present everywhere is *Quests/Goals*. This basically structures the overall journey in smaller fragments, each with its own set of main objectives or secondary objectives. This fragmentation allows for an easier understanding of what is expected from a player, a more connected overall experience and a deeper sense of progression. This brings us to the second important mechanic, that of *progression*. It is clear that players want to feel that they progress through the experience, not that they simply consume the experience. Progress involves an active role from the player within the boundaries of the game, stimulated by the desire of evolution, of reaching a higher level of self-development. Progress goes hand in hand with *discovery*, another important mechanic. Players love the feeling of discovering something new, of being surprised. Whether this involves big discoveries or small details regarding some element its effect is the same.

The other mechanics, while not as used as the previous three, are still present in most games and influence a lot, but the most important aspect is that they are used together with goals, progression and discovery. *Achievements* is the representation of some accomplishment and are used to enhance other mechanics. *Bonuses* are basically rewards for completing challenges or goals. They can tie with other mechanics and reward resources or more discovery and progression. *Cascading information theory* is about realizing the right amount of information needed at a certain stage of the game for a certain purpose and not more information as to not overwhelm the player. *Epic meaning* is the feeling when players put effort in something greater than themselves, like the community, family, environment, etc. *Loss aversion* is the fear of losing something and it shows that players would rather spend more effort on gaining than losing, even if the thing about to be lost is not worth much to the player. *Ownership* is the feeling of possession and which helps drive involvement in the virtual game world. *Resource management* is the way players use available resources to reach different goals.

By taking into account the previously identified strong connection between the player journey and the organizational socialization process, we believe that organizations can use the main game mechanics in the player journey as *principles* in designing their socialization strategies. We highlight the word principles because as any tool that is taken from a different context, these game mechanics have to be adapted and integrated into the overall organizational context and not just copied over from different video games.

The socialization process should be focused on the new employee. All the previous mechanics had the player in center and all were created with the player in mind. The strategy should create and sustain the feeling of progression from outsider to insider while the employee has a feeling of discovery sustained by other such factors as ownership, bonuses, achievements, etc.

For example: Some organizations give out handbooks to new employees in order to provide them with the information needed for the socialization process. Such a technique can

be enhanced with game mechanics to change the way it is presented to the new employee, without changing the content. It could be divided into smaller parts with the first part given to the employee and the other hidden in key departments within the organization. Inside the contents of the first part clues can be added (keeping in mind the cascading information theory mechanic) to the location of the other parts, thus directing the search to other departments and creating connections between the new member and the existing ones. This encompasses both the progression mechanic and the discovery mechanic, as well as hard fun and people fun. This could be further enhanced by offering the new employee personalization artefacts upon completion, thus giving him the feeling of ownership and allowing him to personalize his work place.

All these principles are incomplete without the fun factor. As we have previously shown, fun can be easy, hard, serious, and people driven. In (table no. 2) we look at the way fun was designed during the player journey in the games we studied.

Table 2. Repartition of fun type over game genres during the player journey.
The number of games that have the specified fun types is expressed as %.

	Onboarding	Scaffolding	Mastery
Action	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 0%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 50%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 80%
Role-Playing	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 10%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 50%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 100%
Strategy	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 10%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 70%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 100%
Simulation	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 20%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 80%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 90%
Adventure	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 30%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 60%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 90%
Puzzle	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 20%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 60%	Easy fun 100% Hard fun 100%

In the above table we purposely left out serious fun and people fun. There is no serious fun because due to its subjective nature it is impossible to correctly quantify and evaluate it. We left out player fun because that implies the necessity of multiplayer capabilities of games and not all of those that we studied had multiplayer options. Nowadays the number of games with multiplayer is greatly increasing because of the value of people fun and because of easier development tools and wider internet connectivity.

Before looking at the results in (table no. 2) it is important to remember that hard fun in this context is the feeling of accomplishment, of overcoming obstacles or challenges. In all of the studied games hard fun is on an incremental scale. While in the onboarding phase 0% of the action games had hard fun, in the mastery phase 8 out of 10 games had greatly increased the amount of hard fun. This trend is the same in all game types and it clearly shows that players like hard fun when it scales directly with their skill. When players reach the mastery level they want hard fun. The interesting fact is that easy fun is always present no matter the phase of the player journey and in all games. We remind that easy fun is the non-taxing kind of fun, the one in the details, in the small things. Players want a constant interaction with easy kinds of fun, but only for the beginning of the experience. As they evolve so does the game.

The key takeaway from this is that in the evolution of the organizational socialization techniques, from the beginning to metamorphosis, the complexity of socialization content that faces the new employee should directly scale with his/hers understanding of the organization.

CONCLUSIONS

From exploring the way people socialize in organizations and how video games designers create the process through which they adapt the players to the game, we noticed a strong connection between the organizational socialization process and the player journey. After considering the complexity of video games and looking at different types of fun we can summarize that there is a complicated process in designing the experience of players during the player journey. We believe that organizations can directly benefit from the progress that video games made in adapting their player base to the overall complex systems that games are. By identifying the main mechanics that top games use in their own socialization process we propose the same mechanics as general principles that organizations can use to enhance the way they socialize newcomers. While this research is a promising start in how studying the way video game can improve organization, it's far from being complete. In the future we propose to study how game mechanics can further interact amongst themselves in the organizational context and we also want to take a look at the decision making process and the organizational change process from a video game perspective.

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