

Running head: SEX IN ONLINE GAMES

Aesthetics and gratification:
Sexual practices in virtual environments

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Abstract

Sexual exploration and interaction is commonplace on the Internet, particularly in online virtual environments known as Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). This paper seeks to explore these online practices, and discover how people use these virtual worlds to fulfill themselves sexually. Through online interviews and e-mail correspondence, this research paper explores individuals' sexual interactions in virtual worlds, what types of practices they engage in, and what gratifications they receive.

Overview

When looking at sexuality, one must first understand the motivations behind it. In its strictly non-reproductive form, sex is used primarily as a means of pleasure. Therefore, as sex and sexual activity is so prevalent in all media, one needs to ask why it is widespread as a means of action, reaction, and interaction. By looking at sexual activity in online games, I hope to better understand the interactive aspects of these encounters. Why do people use online games for sexual interaction? Do these games offer a different or unique experience from real-world sex? What types of activities do these players engage in? What are the motivations behind players' online sexual interactions? Do these actions affect their real life?

By talking to people about their online sexual practices and attempting to answer these questions, this research paper hopes to come to a better understand of not just online activity, but its relation to real-world actions and identity. What is unique about participation in an online community is that the decision is made entirely by choice. This is opposed to real-world interactions and decisions, which are the result of a variety of aspects ranging from an assortment of social factors such as nationality, status, income, race, and gender. While these factors may somehow contribute to a person's sexual actions, they in no way explain their conscious sexual decisions.

By looking at sex, one sees a simplified form of human interaction that relies heavily on emotions. Online games offer a unique environment for personal and communal interaction. When juxtaposed to real world interaction,

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these online games may create a better understanding of sexuality and human nature as a whole.

Literature Review

A tangible virtual environment is a relatively new concept for researchers and users alike. While much of our ideas of virtual reality have been shaped by the "technological embodiment found in so much science fiction" (Campbell, 2004, p. 5), the concept of virtual reality is realized in the personal nature of the interactions it now facilitates. While a person cannot be fully separate from the real world while participating in the virtual, Michael Heim observes an inherent shift in the social dynamics of the real world as a result of virtual realities. The personal computer has altered the way we look at our reality, and these virtual worlds have changed cultural norms and the way we interact with others (Heim, 1998). A virtual world is not a replacement for reality, but a contributing element. Clive Thompson agrees with Heim in this assessment of virtual worlds. He argues that an online world is the perfect place to better interpret the real world, for it offers the best and worst of real-world society in an encapsulated form (Thompson, 2005).

Still, there are others who do not fully understand the difference between a "virtual world" and a "virtual reality." Indeed both seem similar but are decidedly different. Chika Anyanwu (1998) makes the distinction in that online games are in no way virtual realities, as "realities" connotes the idea that a sacrifice is being made. Online games do not replace the actual reality, but supplement it. No one is ever physically able to leave the real world for a simulated one. These publications describe a virtual world that is in no way completely separate from the real. In many ways it represents human behavior, but differentiates itself from real-world interactions.

However, while the two worlds are separate, virtual environments can illicit the same real-world reactions as interpersonal interaction. T.L. Taylor (2002) touches upon embodiment in virtual worlds when she speaks of the interaction between player and computer and how it is generally personal and psychological. The nature of online worlds and virtual environments embody not a tool, but a means of interaction. Taylor notes that the reason for the prevalence of sexual activity in virtual environments is that the "experience and presence evoked in these environments is powerful" (p. 49). It is not necessarily the physical contact that evokes certain responses, but the mental and conversational interaction that can result in similar physical reactions. Virtual environments seek to both simulate and enhance existing reality. Though there are obvious restrictions in interaction, virtual worlds offer an exciting alternative for those seeking sexual gratification by alternative means.

In terms of sexual practices in virtual worlds, its existence assumes that those who are engaging in sexual activity within these worlds have personal motivations for doing so. Uses and gratifications theory provides an overall rationale for these actions. In their research on an audience's use of media, Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (1974) outline their theory on the audience as an active participant (p. 21). While Blumler and Katz focus their research on

television audiences and their uses and gratifications of the medium, the theory could easily be applied to Internet gaming. While it is relatively easy to define media consumers as inactive observers of television programming, it is difficult to attribute this passivity to computer games. Single player gaming warrants its own uses and gratifications perspective. Sherry Turkle (1984) outlines some basic gaming uses and what she calls a computer "holding power" (p. 65). Single player gaming looks at user participation as a binary activity, with the player receiving certain gratifications based on the physical amount of use put into the game. Turkle's theory on gaming as its own motivator relies solely on computers as a tool instead of a communicative medium.

Uses and gratifications theory may be expanded to include interactions within online games. Richard Bartle (2003) touches on relevant elements when he categorizes Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) players into four categories: achievers (those who want to level or gain experience), explorers (those who are interested in discovery within the virtual world), socializers (those who enjoy interacting with other players) and killers (those who like to kill computer characters or other players). Though Bartle's categorization of MMORPG players is limited to four possibilities, it demonstrates how the same online environment appeals to different people in varying ways. Nick Yee (2005) makes an attempt at understanding the expectations and uses of online gamers as he creates a model for player motivations. While Yee received a wide array of responses, they very much are limited to the confines of an online role-playing game, and fell in quite nicely to Bartle's template for MMORPG players. While Yee adds elements of sociability in his data about players' motivations, he also includes responses related strictly to the players' interactions with the environment, decidedly omitting other players in their uses and gratifications of the game.

When uses and gratifications theory is applied to sexual interaction in online environments, it fits in nicely to the template established by Blumler and Katz. Shawn Elliott (2006) writes about the prevalence of prostitution within Second Life and how it relates to players' real desires or gratifications. It shows that people not only use online sex as a means of personal gratification, but as an indirect means of receiving something else, such as online currency or notoriety.

The concept of online identity plays heavily into people's decisions within Internet communities. While the Internet offers no set parameters or restrictions, most who use the medium gravitate towards online communities with their own sets of restrictions and expectations. John Edward Campbell (2004), in his ethnographic study of sexuality in cyberspace, focuses on the interactions of gay men in Internet Relay Chats (IRCs). As Campbell discusses this online IRC community, he claims that Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) were "too technical and required too great a time investment to be attractive forms of online socializing" (p. 37). While Campbell's research seems to focus on IRC conversations because of his inherent resistance towards MUDs and other types of online games, this shaped his research to hold a solely text-based and communal interaction between individuals with common sexual preferences.

Participants were very much aware of their real-life sexual identity and sought out people with similar interests through online means.

Sherry Turkle (1995) researches identity as well, but focuses mainly on online games such as MMOGs and MUDs. In her personal experimentation with online identity, particularly in regards to gender and sexual preference, Turkle shows how one could easily use the aesthetic appeals of the game as a means of labeling, categorizing and identifying. "Playing MUDs, whether as a man, a woman, or a neuter character" she says "I quickly fell into the habit of orienting myself to new cyberspace acquaintances" (p. 211). While online chat communities such as IRC rely solely on a user's words as a means of identity, online games may use visual and descriptive means to orient a player into the community. Nick Yee (2003) touches on users' self identity and how that relates to their avatars. While "some choose to identify and personify their avatar with their own personality... others objectify their avatar and see it as a pawn in an abstracted playing field" (Yee, 2003). Yee found that female players generally create an idealized version of themselves more than men do. As identity applies more to self-image, the concept of online sexual interaction comes into play. Some games, such as Everquest or World of Warcraft, see self image as inconsequential and secondary to leveling or world exploration. Other games are aware of the importance of identity and aesthetics, and focus heavily on interpersonal and communal interaction. Helen Cheng (2006) outlines some of these current and unreleased online games, focusing on Sociolotron, 3FEEL, and Naughty America: The Game. These games and others, such as Second Life and The Sims Online, rely heavily on the projected image of the player. If gender had a great effect on Turkle's play in MUDs, then these games make gender and sexual identity a mainstay of their use.

With uses and gratifications theory, sexual practice in online worlds assumes that there is something in these worlds that harbors, facilitates, and assists these activities. Much of this is attributed to sexual semiotics, in that certain words, images, ideas and activities stimulate sexual gratification. This is often applied to the real world, where signs play a big role in sex. John H. Gagnon and William Simon's (1973) *Sexual Conduct* focuses on upbringing and how it contributes to a person's future sexual practices. Their research focuses on the road to sexual maturity from childhood to post-adolescence, and how those years shape a person's sexual preferences. According to the study, circumstances greatly shape whether a person decides to be heterosexual or homosexual. This is not limited to upbringing, but unforeseen circumstances such as imprisonment and relocation. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (1981) agree with this assessment, but claim that sexual preference is culturally constructed. "What has not been generally recognized" they claim, is "an assumption that male and female are predominantly natural objects rather than predominantly cultural constructions" (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981, p. 1). While the researchers dispute this claim of men and women as "natural objects" they indirectly admit that certain cultural symbols make up what it is to be a man and a woman. It is not an assumed status, but something that must be proven and supported by symbolic representation. Men must look like men and women must look like women, according to their respective cultural construction. This is done through assumed signs of masculinity and femininity.

The most predominant sexual activity that supports this use of semiotics and symbols for gratification and pleasure can be found in the practice of fetishism. If someone has a particular fetish, then he is aroused or stimulated by certain images, words or preferences. Valerie Steele (1996), in her study about sadomasochist fetishism, focuses on fashion and identity within the subculture. However, despite the underground history of this sexual practice, it has slowly emerged into the mainstream, particularly in the fashion industry. "Fetishism is especially significant at this time in history" she claims "because it is no longer associated primarily with individual sexual 'perversions' or sexual subcultures" (Steele, 1996, p. 33). Steele defines fetishism in her study as the practice of domination and submission in a violent manner, and the predominantly leather fashion choices in its practice. While one does not need to be a sadomasochist to wear the fashions, the two are intrinsically connected, and wearing corsets, kinky boots, and catsuits immediately conjures up the image. This is important in regards to semiotics, for the fashion itself creates sexual imagery in the mind, and its emotional weight completely relies on preconceived notions.

While the use of fetishist clothing is common in the fashion industry as a means of shock and controversy, fetishism is common throughout the Internet. These fetishist practices are ideal for an online world, for they rely primarily on imagery, words and connotations for sexual stimulation. As a result, online worlds such as Second Life and Sociolotron cater to a fetishist audience, allowing those interested in the practice to use chat features, programming, and avatar costumes to simulate their own sexual activity.

Study Design

The design of the study reflects what I think is the best means of answering my research questions. Why do people use online games for sexual interaction? Do these games offer a different or unique experience from real-world sex? What types of activities do these players engage in? What are their motivations behind their online decisions? Do these actions affect their real life? To go about answering these questions I looked at works on uses and gratifications, virtual worlds, sexual semiotics, and identity in a gaming environment. I then explored online communities and recruited participants for the study, so that I could ask them questions about their online sexual activity and how it relates to their real world actions.

Participants. In order to recruit individuals for the study, I looked at different means of online communities where those willing to talk about their online sexual activity may congregate. As a result, I tapped various online weblogs that dealt exclusively with sex in online games, as well as some online forums (Appendix 1). With each posting, I included my recruitment message (Appendix 2) which outlined my research topic. Because of my postings in the weblogs, recruitment went relatively well, as each weblog garnered a large audience, as it was picked up by other websites.

Procedures. Once I had accumulated a number of people willing to participate in the study, I used different means of getting in contact with them. Most of these responses came through e-mail, but most of these e-mail exchanges were merely preliminary in our interaction, and were a means of organizing a more intimate conversation. Many of the interviews occurred within Second Life, through its IM chat feature. Other conversations happened through the use of AOL Instant Messenger. Only one participant decided on a solely e-mail-based interaction. For this individual I sent him two or three questions at a time, and his responses shaped the next series of questions. In order to appeal to people who wanted a semi-intimate setting but didn't have time for a one-on-one online interview, I created an online forum for our interactions. However, despite this foresight, I never used the forum, as almost every participant had time for a personal interview.

For all interviews I decided on a predominantly qualitative process. I assumed that everyone's sexual practices were decidedly different, so a survey or list would not work for my purposes. However, despite the informal interview process, I had a general outline of questions that I typically touched upon in some way (Appendix 3). In addition to the personal interviews with anonymous respondents, I engaged in a correspondence with Kyle Machulis, who is an expert on online sex and teledildonics.

Results

After interviewing individuals, I noticed that sexual practice in online worlds is very much a personal endeavor. My audience was a wide range of individuals of different genders and ages, and as a result, their preferences were decidedly varied in nature. Despite the wide array of answers, many people admit to practicing some sort of role-play in their sexual activities in online worlds. One respondent, Laura, vaguely describes her online sexual activities as merely "sexual roleplay" while others subscribed to much more specific sexual activities.

One respondent, Talena, regularly engages in an online sexual role-play called "Gorean" or simply "Gor." Gor is based on the futuristic science fiction novels of John Norman, and focuses primarily on the psychological relation between the "master" and sexual "slave." Talena was quick to point out that Gor was not sadomasochism, for it does not center on violence, but psychological domination and submission. "It's not the violence I'm interested in" Talena says "It's more the interplay between minds. Violence rarely entered the picture." Kyle Machulis was quick to point out that Gor is "perfect for an online setting" (Machulis, 2006). He elaborates on Gor's popularity online and how it centers on activities that many people would find tedious. "Hardcore Goreans are the trekkies of fetishists" in that there is a fair amount of memorization in certain practices, as "[s]laves have to do certain dances on certain occasions with certain veils" (Machulis, 2006). In spite of Gor's online popularity, Talena claims that she has "known people who do this for real" but it isn't common. It is very much a practice that is found primarily on the Internet.

While some people's role-play activities are more extreme than others, Machulis admits that with sexual activity in online worlds, there's "tons of roleplay involved. Very few people go online to be themselves" (Machulis, 2006). Many of the participants have a heavy background in various other role-play activities outside of MMOGs. Many participants admit to sexual practices on AOL Instant Messenger and IRC, while others, such as Roger, cite pen and paper role-playing games as an influence for their online sexual activities:

This experience does help a lot with cyber-sex, because I'm very practiced with giving descriptions of events. Shame I lose all the voice tone/pacing in text, but I still manage.

While some people admit to engaging in little to no fetishist activity, it is a decided mainstay of online sexual encounters. Roger elaborates on his motivations for his online sex and how, in most cases, it is not a serious endeavor, but a simple way to play around with sexual activity and identity:

It's easy, hassle free, risk free. I can try fetishes and ignore all the downsides of them, focusing only on the positive parts. I can switch gender/species, again focusing on the positive and ignoring all the negative drawbacks.

It's not as good as real-life sex, but in RL I can't just have someone teleport to my house when I feel horny, fuck me, and then kick them out the door.

Some people do not use MMOGs strictly for online sexual encounters, but as a means of attention and spectatorship. One participant, Kayla, elaborates on the attention she received in World of Warcraft:

[I] am unashamed to admit that I've made my sexy night elf /dance while wearing only a g-string, cheerfully accepting tips from other players as they / whistle, then open a trade window to give me a gold piece or two in thanks for the show. I've "played" with items, expressing my [Powerful Mojo] as the male "toon" displays his [Runed Arcanite Rod] (oh, it gets worse). I've earned in-game stalkers because of my "flirtatious attitude", they say, and have a loooooong /ignore list thanks to stalkers that take it too far.

Other participants treat their online relationships much more seriously than Roger and Kayla. Laura, who retains both a real-life and virtual boyfriend, regards her online relationship as "intimate, sexual fun" in that, with sexual activity as a mainstay of their online interactions, it is very much a simulation of a real-world personal relationship. "I have a very intimate relationship with my [Second Life boyfriend]" she says, "we make compromises as to where we will spend time and what we will do."

The most surprising findings involved the aesthetic appeal of online games and its effect on the participant's sexual gratification. Those who use the visual aspects of the game did so through some features of Second Life's software. This involved the scripting of certain sexual organs, or the use of "pose balls" which are objects in Second Life that allow a person's avatar to simulate sexual intercourse.

Results were decidedly divided as to whether visual aspects were important in sexual interaction. Some saw these features as key to their online sexual interactions, while others saw them as mere distractions, and served little to no purpose for their online sexual gratification. Laura claimed that the aesthetics and visual features of Second Life assisted her greatly in her online sexual activities as the game's "visual experience... heightens the feelings." Roger expresses his appeal for visual aspects of Second Life as well:

I like seeing the avatars visually, but for actual animations I prefer to use a generic cuddle or a single set of sex balls that vaguely matches... trying to manipulate the 3D actions to keep up with events is just a waste of time and spoils the mood.

Other participants regarded the visual assistance to be secondary, or even distracting. Talena claims that Second Life's visual features are not important to her.

when i've been [with] a partner who wanted to use them, you know what? i cover the whole screen with the chat window because it just looks so stupid to me... imagination interests me. people's ideas interest me. their fantasies, certainly. watching a cartoon character? not so much.

This resistance towards visual assistance was surprising, as I assumed that anything to help the experience would be welcomed. But some saw it as a distraction, and contributed nothing to their online sexual gratification.

Discussion

My findings did, in a way, answer many of my research questions. However, as I expected, there is no one answer to any of the questions. Online sexual experience is very much a personal endeavor; one person may have one way of doing it while another may prefer something entirely different. In regards to visual environments versus solely text-based media, Kyle Machulis provides a possible explanation for a user's choices:

People will use the interface they're comfortable with, be it text, or visual, or whatever. The intensity doesn't come from the interface, or the hardware, it comes from having some intimate knowledge or feelings for the person on the other end. (Machulis, 2006)

As is the case, people will make different decisions based on their own personal preferences. While the reasons for these preferences may be generational (older players may prefer the text-based MUDs that they grew up with, while younger people may appreciate the visual assistance that MMOGs have to offer) for the most part it cannot be attributed to one factor. Some people find stimulation by certain means, and advancing technology cannot change that. People use the Internet for different sexual needs. While participants like Roger claim that online sex is "not as good as real-life sex" they choose to use MMOGs as a means of simulating real-world sexual interactions. Laura's relationship with her online boyfriend in Second Life mirrors that of a real-world relationship and she uses the visual features, like pose balls and "scripted body parts" to enhance the

experience and make it more real. Antithetically, players such as Talena choose to rely more on the psychological experience and the fantasy of creating a situation seemingly unworldly in nature.

Whether people subscribe to the in-game visual aides or not, their sexual gratification strongly relies on signs, symbols, words and connotations that evoke real-world emotions. While the entire practice relies on fantasy and semiotics, it is rarely a substitute for real-life interpersonal relationships. Talena retains a real-world husband, and Laura has a real-world boyfriend. In fact, Laura claims that her boyfriend benefits from her online sexual activates. "I get to explore being sexual without actually being with another person" she says "[a]nd I often feel desire as a result, which I express to him." Online sex is not a means of replacing real-world sex, but, as Machulis claims, it's "about allowing people who couldn't previously have sex outside of manual stimulation and their imagination [to] have some sort of outlet" (Machulis, 2006). While there is much discussion about single player sex games and online pornography, these are mere tools for personal sexual gratification. Sexual practices in multiplayer online worlds straddle the line between masturbation and intimate sexual activity. While there is no interpersonal contact between the participants, they interact with each other through the use of a visual and text-based medium. There is a give-and-take that allows the experience to be shared, and not merely a form of masturbatory stimulation.

In regards to the practice of fetishism in an online world, virtual environments are perfect for a person who is experimenting with sexual experiences and identity. MMOGs allow the user to be as anonymous as he wishes to be. As a result, a person can easily switch sexual identities—male to female, Gor to sadomasochism, realistic role-play to fantasy—at his own leisure. Machulis attributes this ease of identity switch with the desire for challenge:

Well, with text-based stuff, it's pretty easy to get bored unless you've got a specific fetish you're looking to fulfill. So, a lot of people develop what I refer to as a "Metafetish". This basically means playing with someone with... a specific fetish... even if it may not be your own fetish. The sexual interaction comes not from the act of the fetish itself, but from the challenge of turning the other person on, on their terms. It's more about the writing and situational challenge than what the end actionable result is. (Machulis, 2006)

The Internet allows these individuals to avoid fully subscribing to these identities, by allowing people to leave them at any moment. While Gor relies on a "slave" and "master" relationship, it is entirely voluntary. Talena role-plays as a slave and feels a level of obligation and devotion to her respective master; though in reality she is free to leave whenever she wants. Because she enjoys the pure fantasy of the experience, real-world elements disrupted the image and damaged the community and interpersonal relationships. Those who participate in Gor get certain gratifications through either dominating over their slaves or submitting to their masters. One of my main questions was whether the participant used the Internet as a means of fulfilling a sexual desire that cannot be satisfied in the real world. In many cases, the results were mixed, but all participants were quick to make a clear-cut distinction between real life and a virtual environment. Online sexual role-play is typically a means of exploring

other sides of their sexuality that they would not be comfortable with in the real world. This may mean that they are expressing latent desires, or simply exploring in a safe and anonymous environment.

Conclusion

Regardless of how realistic or fantastical the situation is, online sex is a voluntary activity. As a result, there is an inherent freedom in its practice. People are less restricted by cultural assumptions or real-life dangers such as injury or disease. As a result, sex in virtual worlds is a common practice, and though it cannot replace actual sexual intercourse, it is used by many participants to enhance their existing and potentially fruitful real-world sexual activity. In addition, people participate in MMOG-based sexual endeavors for a variety of reasons. Studying sex in virtual environments is unique in that it merges many different studies; combining elements of uses and gratifications theory, identity, semiotics, and alternate reality. Because the participants were so varied in their responses, they show that sex is not a singular topic, even in regards to something as seemingly specific as Massively Multiplayer Online Games and the sexual practices within them.

This topic has great potential for further research, and can cover a wide array of subtopics. Future research could look at specific subcultures of these sexual practices. Gor, along with other online sexual subcultures, is a great topic for further discussion, particularly in regards to online interactions, as Gor primarily exists in the realm of the Internet. Not only do people have different reasons behind their online sexual activity, but the activity itself is widely varied in its practice, and can range from fun, noncommittal exploratory role-play to a specific fetish with its own set of practices and expectations. I did not expect to fully answer any one of my research questions, but rather to explore the topic and understand the reasons behind people's online sexual activity. The responses were as varied and interesting as the topic itself, which demands further in-depth discussion and research.

Appendix 1. Posting Locations

Name	URL
Sex & Games	http://www.igda.org/sex
Second Life Forums	http://forums.secondlife.com
MMOrgy	http://mmorgy.com
SlashDong	http://slashdong.com

Appendix 2. Sample Recruitment Message

Hello,

My name is Nick and I'm an undergraduate at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. I'm currently enrolled in a class about virtual worlds. As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to talk to players about their sexual experiences within virtual environments such as Everquest II, Second Life and Sociolotron. I plan on conducting these interviews via e-mail, online forums, instant messages and in-game interactions.

I realize that this is a sensitive subject. I have no ulterior motives to this study except to learn about people and their in-game sexual practices. If you decide to participate, your anonymity and confidentiality will be assured. The study will only mention the subjects' genders and ages.

You must be at least 18 to participate. If you are willing to be interviewed, please contact me at:

sexinmmogs@gmail.com

I have also created an online forum for the study. If you would like to establish a dialogue via a password-protected forum thread, please set up an account by going to the forum and clicking on the "register" button. Setting up an account requires e-mail verification. The address is:

<http://sexinmmogs.proboards98.com>

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thank you for your time.

Nick

Appendix 3. Interview Questions

- What is your age and gender?
- What types of MMOGs do you play?
- What are your expectations for these games?
- Do you have different intentions or uses for each game?
- What type of sexual activity do you engage in with these games?
- Does this activity vary from game to game?
- Do you ever engage in sexual role-play?
- Do you think you've ever gone too far in a sexual role-play?
- How do game aesthetics shape your sexual activity or interactions?
- Do you consider your in-game sexual activity public or private in nature?
- Is your in-game sexual activity different from that in the real world?
- Do you use MMOGs to fulfill a sexual need that you cannot satisfy in the real world?
- Do you consider your in-game sexual activity to be intimate? Why or why not?
- Are your sexual encounters generally text-based or do you use other dynamics of the game to enhance the experience?

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