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# Play Society Research Project

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**Abstract**

This paper introduces how a approach on creating experiment setups for identifying tipping points of playfulness – when something stops being playful, or when something turns in to playful. The approach is implemented in a project that has just started, and in the paper we will explain in detail a part of the project hypothesis titled as conceptual analysis of playfulness. The overall goal of the project is to provide guidelines for the media and ICT industry on how to create playful applications and services. The conceptual analysis work package can deliver a wider understanding of playful experiences and the nature of playfulness.

**Keywords**

Playfulness, gamification, design research, prototypes, media industry

**Introduction**

Gaming is a megatrend. Not only kids and boys, but also aged people and both genders play and buy games. Playfulness is not related only to video gaming, but it appears in many different products, applications, services and activities. Playfulness is somewhat analogous to fun, enjoyable, engaging, non-seriousness, exploration, challenge, immersion, but then again, it can be related also to “harder” qualities such as well-defined feedback or control, just to name some of the key perspectives playfulness can take.

One of key benefits of playfulness is the fact that people like to spend time with things that are playful. For example, the iPhone is often described as playful device – without ever explaining what this actually means.

Currently, there is no dominant framework for defining what playfulness means, how something becomes playful, and why it is important. Previous studies conducted in NRC Tampere [1] have explored the different models that describe playfulness or game experience. This study also formulated a new playfulness model called PLEX. The PLEX Framework has been utilized in a number of studies and design cases [2][3]. Further, a set of design cards has been created on basis of the framework. [4]

Understanding and mastering playfulness can have a dramatic effect on how people can be persuaded to buy media products and services, and even more importantly, how to make customers spend a lot of time with products and services. Time spent with products has a paramount importance in networked media, especially when we are talking about functionalities that are dependent on social content.

The play society project is about understanding how and why something becomes playful. This is achieved with a series of prototypes and experiments that focus on the critical tipping points between playful and non-playful. Also, the project focuses on understanding what the social dimensions of playful experience are, and how playfulness facilitates co-experience. Experiments include user tests with prototypes and questionnaire-based data collection and analysis, as well as psychophysiology-based measures. Ultimately,

the project delivers general recommendations related to playful design. When we understand better how and why playfulness emerges, then we can create better and more enjoyable designs and interfaces for games, media in general, and software and design overall.

### **Research methods**

The play society project is based on the following experiment structure:

- Hypothesis development workshops
- Prototype and experiment design
- Prototype development
- User studies

The hypothesis development and prototype design is focused on delivering experimental setups with conditions that could show structured and statistically valid differences between playfulness and non-playfulness. The goal is to generate these two conditions with a minimum amount of manipulation and clearly structured design principles. Hence, the idea of the experimental setup is to create a tipping point for playfulness. This tipping point can be based on manipulation in the interface or interaction design, social context of use, or in the content composition. With this initial study we are not aiming for a comprehensive model or observation on playfulness, but merely a single thread of empirical validation on how a shift can take place. Then again, gaining a comprehensive view on playfulness is the ultimate goal of the project. For this, we have developed a conceptual analysis research track, which will be implemented in parallel with experiments.

### **Conceptual analysis**

The first deliverable of the hypothesis development part of the project has been a new playful events categorization. This categorization will be used to build the conceptual model from the bottom up. Basically, this model is complementing the PLEX approach. Categorization is based on identification of different reported playful user experiences. We collected the events in a workshop by utilizing 6-3-5 brainwriting method originally developed by Bernd Rohrbach. [5]

In the workshop, we had 13 participants and achieved to collect more than 300 different playful events. We have analyzed the reported events and generated a draft categorization based on them.

In the next phase, we will repeat the workshop procedure several times with different user groups. This way, we can expand the amount of reported events, and make our model more robust. We have also plans to add new features to the workshop, which would allow users to identify to which category the reported experience belongs in their opinion, or to generate new categories. Ultimately, these workshops will refine and validate the categorization.

After we have a categorization, we will proceed with the conceptual analysis by breaking down each category into smaller temporal components. This will allow us to understand the underlying structures behind each category and hopefully will reveal new insights regarding the nature of the playfulness.

### **Playfulness and Gamification**

Our primary goal in understanding playfulness is to be able to design for playfulness, or how playful

experience and events can be delivered and designed. Gamification is about how game elements can be used in the design of non-games. In this way, our goal with playfulness is similar to the gamification; actually, we could call our approach in the Play society project as “playfulication”.

Playing and gaming are related topics. The seminal publications on game research by Huizinga and Caillois are basically talking more about playing than gaming. Another way around, the background theories behind the PLEX model are taken from game theories as well as from play theories. A narrow perspective could claim that gaming is a subset of playing. Then again, there are some forms of games and gaming quite far away from something that could be described as playful event. Differences of playing and gaming can be found from how the goal is defined in the activity, or how the activity is surrounded by a kind of game world.

In practice, the concepts of playing and gaming are more complex, and relating them is not a straightforward task. Also, playing and playful activity are somewhat distinct concepts. Overall, we have found that defining playfulness via other theoretical concepts (such as experiences, activity mechanisms, rules or sub-elements) is an ultimately complex path. For these reasons, we have chosen the bottom-up approach in the conceptual analysis of playfulness in the Play Society project. Also, for this reason, we do consider gamification and our “playfulication” aligned topics, and we believe that theories and practices under both topics can be potentially applied to each other.

In the Play Society project, we target to identify tipping points between playfulness and non-playfulness.

Currently, based on our preliminary conceptual analysis, it is probable that the tipping point manipulations that we choose will be related to the situation of the activity instead of the activity assignment or the product or interface used in the experiment. This is because the subject's self-reports highlight the importance of the situation surrounding the specified playful event. Situation is a generic concept, by which we mean for example context variables, social dynamics, relationships between people and the place, or the state-of-mind of the user.

It is highly probable that when we achieve to identify the tipping points of playfulness, we can also deliver results that explain something about game experience. Understanding the dynamics between situation and game experience will have strong implications on how gamification can be delivered. Furthermore, understanding how to manipulate the situation is a significant topic for both gamification and for designing for playfulness.

### **Project Organization**

The Play Society project is a combination of academic and industrial research. It is also part of a bigger research project framework called Next Media, which is linking together 6 Universities and over 20 media companies in Finland. Play Society project-leading organization is Nokia Research Center Tampere. The other industrial partner is Sanoma Corporation – the biggest media company in Finland. Academic leader is Helsinki Institute for Information Technology, and other research partners are Center for Knowledge and Innovation Research (CKIR) Helsinki and Game research lab in the University of Tampere.

Overall, the project has ambitious goals of achieving empirical validation for how playfulness could be designed in a media product. The research consortium has extensive experience on various experimentation and analysis methods, theoretical formulations of playfulness and game experience, and game design and prototyping, which gives us good capabilities to pursue this challenging task.

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### **Citations**

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