



Figure 1: Ola De La Vida being played at the Games are for Everyone play party in Edinburgh, UK, 2017

Playing Beyond the Front Room: Designing for Social Play in Ola De La Vida

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ABSTRACT

Ola De La Vida is a three-player cooperative game installation which is designed to harness the qualities of social play environment such as an arcade or play party (an event which mixes games, music, dance and socializing). Ola De La Vida uses physical and digital design techniques that consider the unique qualities of a social play space being sensitive to the complex personal, social and interpersonal aspects each player may experience. The game installation uses its scale to heighten the visibility of the game in a crowded play space, custom control methods to lower barriers to entry and costume to promote teamwork, collaboration and to lower social anxieties. These techniques, in partnership with the digital-physical nature of the game play aims to entice players and spectators in a social environment to participate. Through this installation we hope to encourage discussion around designing for participation and the challenges of social play.

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CHI'19 Extended Abstracts, May 4–9, 2019, Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-5971-9/19/05.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290607.3313286>

KEYWORDS

social play; game design; user experience design; performance and play.



Figure 2: Ola De La Vida being played at the Scottish Parliament, UK (top), Arcadia Festival Play Party in Dundee, UK, (middle) and at the IDGA Play Party in Dundee, UK (bottom).

INTRODUCTION

Video games have begun to move out of the home and into social spaces; bars and clubs now play host to a mix of gaming, live music, socializing and dancing in the form of game nights or play parties. These events are alternative modern arcades which draw video games fans and new audiences alike to play games that are digital, physical or often times a mixture of both. Such play parties, like arcades, sustain parallel and performative play [4] and the games displayed are often designed with this lively environment in mind, using design techniques to attempt to increase their pull [1] to draw in players and audiences.

Ola De La Vida (ODLV) is a social play game designed for the social play environment aiming to harness the qualities of this environment to invite participation, camaraderie and interaction [figure 2]. ODLV has previously been studied in relation to widening spectatorship [2], focusing upon the design of the game to blur boundaries between the players and spectator. Drawing from the findings of player focus testing and anecdotal feedback gathered in play party environments, the authors believe ODLV as an installation offers insight into social play design which enhances participation and is sensitive to personal, social and interpersonal dynamics presented by social play contexts.

PLAYING ODLV: STEPPING INTO THE PONCHO

In preparation to play ODLV, each player adorns an oversized poncho for three, stands upon a Wii balance board, and hold hands with one another [figure 2]. Once in position, the players at each end of the wave lift the Maraca controllers [figure 4]. The resulting physical contact between the three players complete the maraca controller's circuit and the game begins.

To play, players must sway side to side with their bodies in order to tilt their part of the on-screen digital wave of life, working as a team to help get as many physics driven digital creatures across the three-projector wide screen as possible in 120 seconds. Players must maintain contact throughout the game while tilting their bodies, making game play a physical and digital challenge.

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL PLAY ENVIRONMENTS

ODLV aims to harness the qualities of social play environments in three ways: Scale and presentation to draw attention to itself [figure 3]; custom controllers to enhance accessibility [figure 4]; and performance and costumes to tackle personal and interpersonal issues in a social play space [figure 1 and 2].



Figure 3: the Ola De La Vida installation makes use of three projectors, three Wii balance boards and a custom maraca controller

“I loved the collaborative experience of having to physically cooperate with my team. As someone who finds game controllers difficult (I never know which button to press) the instinctive nature of the controls meant I instantly had an idea of what to do and had fun working out the finer moves with the whole team.” (Anecdotal Player Feedback).

Scale and Presentation

The exaggerated widescreen projection and arms-length spaced balance boards of ODLV requires a footprint of 4 meters by 3 meters, heightening its visibility in a social play environment: it is often one of the largest games in a space, alongside virtual reality games [figure 3]. The bright screen and placement of the players in front of it has a silhouetting effect, creating a stage for play to occur. This layout creates a performative spectacle, drawing spectatorship as the digital and physical play can be simultaneously viewed by the audience. The large play space also naturally ensures that there are spaces for an audience to gather and watch. The scale and performative play design lower the barrier to entry to the game facilitating learning through watching which in turn, enhances the social nature of the game [1].

The scale and whimsical nature has been acknowledged by players as drawing their attention to ODLV within the busy play party setting. Silliness, novelty and conviviality are also attributed to attracting their curiosity and encouraging participation.

Custom Controls: A Level Playing Field

Players must use their bodies to control their digital avatar in ODLV. The movement of their bodies is affected by the movement of their co-players and the game is an ongoing negotiation between players to achieve the physical positions required to drive the digital on-screen game play. The physical action of each player is digitized to on screen action through their weight distribution across their individual Wii balance board. Although using off the shelf hardware for the measurement of individual player’s input (the balance board), the inter-player negotiation of position (i.e. weight distribution) and the visual cues given by the game obscure the balance boards as controllers for the players.

Such obscurity provides equal footing for players as no player has an advantage due to their mastery of standard game controllers or the lack thereof. Instead, players must learn how to play the game together, through trial and error. Social play environments often draw diverse attendees, from avid gamers to those who may be more interested in the social or entertainment aspects of the event. Custom control systems (or the impression of them, as presented in ODLV) invite experimentation and collaboration, whilst lowering the barrier to entry for those less familiar with standard game controllers.

Performance and Costumes: A Three-Headed Poncho to Ease the Nerves?

ODLV makes use of a costume, a poncho, which envelopes the three players in a three-headed, six-footed amorphous blob. The poncho was firstly introduced to thematically address technical

“The fact it is one big one [poncho], it makes you feel as a whole, so you have to work together as a team rather than as an individual because you’re thinking “okay, I’m linked, I’m bonding with these people” this is one big poncho, so this is my team and we all have to work together, to the same goal” (Focus Group Player Feedback).



Figure 4: A Close up of one of the maraca controllers that ensures players hold hands throughout play. If contact is broken, the wave of life disappears from the screen and play cannot resume until the players reconnect their hands.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our co-designers of this game, Danny Parker and Alex Pass for their collaboration and ongoing creative input and all of the players and focus group attendees who have contributed to the development of ODLV.

limitations in the design process, however, was found to support personal and interpersonal aspects which exist in the social play environment. Playing in front of people in a social environment can cause discomfort and can discourage participation for some. For players, the poncho promotes a sense of togetherness and camaraderie; they felt part of a team, more immersed in game play and although they may look silly, at least they look silly together.

The poncho also helps decrease anxiety around the physical contact element of play; many players acknowledge that holding hands with a stranger is unusual behavior, but the poncho provides permission through obscurity and camaraderie. The need for physical interaction to play can introduce a potential barrier to entry by creating discomfort for players. A small number of players identified social anxiety about playing together. In these cases, the digital game play was found to ease these concerns as focusing upon scoring points acted as a distraction. ODLV can be a social object, a third *thing* which eases and facilitates social interaction between players [3].

PLAYING THE WAVE OF LIFE: SOME THOUGHTS TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

Ola De La Vida is one of many game installations which utilize physical and digital play design techniques to invite participation within social play environments. It relies upon scale, spectacle, accessibility and costume to promote participation whilst seeking to mitigate discomfort players may have around generally playing in public or about specifically playing Ola De La Vida. As an installation, it provides a talking point around the design of social play which crosses disciplinary boundaries, utilizing physical and digital tools from game design, theatre and performance to heighten game play, enhance accessibility and lessen barriers to entry.

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