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Introduction

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As a school or tradition of philosophy, pragmatism (Greek πράσσειν, “to do”) is usually attributed to Charles Sanders Peirce, with particular reference to his pragmatic maxim. This maxim, introduced in Peirce’s eminent essay “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), goes as follows:

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Following on from this, early pragmatism is often associated with John Dewey, who arguably refined the pragmatic way of thinking into its most systematic classical form. The Deweyan form of pragmatism is the one through which this article looks at the computer game. A quote from Dewey’s Essays in Experimental Logic (1916) captures our modern understanding of the term:

[data] are not objects but means, instrumentalities, of knowledge: things by which we know rather than things known … an idea is a draft drawn upon existing things, and intention to act so as to arrange them in a certain way … the meaning of an object is the changes it requires in our attitude (43, 310; emphasis added)

Following Dewey, one may thus speak pragmatically of the computer game in two conceptual ways: as a practical idea that an individual holds about the computer game, and as a practical meaning that the computer game has for the individual. The former consists of the prearranged expectations that a person sets on things that they approach as computer games; the latter consists of the concrete effects that engaging with computer games produces in the person. In both cases, importantly, the conception of the computer game is for the individual. People conceive, hear, and think of computer games in specific (changing) ways because those ways help them live in a world where interacting with such
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**Computer Game as a Practical Idea**

To recap: as a practical idea, the computer game involves prearranged expectations that people set on things that they approach as computer games. That is to say that thinking of computer games in a specific manner adjusts individuals’ expectations on what computer games do to them and what the individuals are supposed to do to computer games. The consequences of these expectations are very concrete. For instance, the preconception of computer games as objects that challenge, contest, and evaluate their users keeps some individuals far from anything that reminds them of computer games; simultaneously, others with the same preconception get disappointed when the things that they approach as computers games end up not challenging, contesting, or evaluating them. In this sense, the
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People around the world have different preconceptions of what a computer game is, what it does, and what we do with it. These preconceptions are practical ideas that people use when they engage things as computer games in their everyday environments, thus contributing to daily human (inter)action. Keeping in mind that “play,” “game,” and other related notions have always been conceptualized and framed differently in diverse aesthetics as well as linguistically refined cultural settings (e.g. Groos 1901; Hein 1968; Pellegrini 2009), it is worth stressing that some individuals may lack the practical
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From a pragmatic viewpoint, computer games can be conceived of as things with designed practical meanings that a large portion of their players acknowledge and undertake, thus making players act, behave, and think in ways that correspond to those practical meanings, albeit with the caveat that players may ignore those designed practical meanings and come up with their own. Again, none of the practical meanings need correspond with the players’ practical ideas of what computer games are, or what a particular computer game is.

The observation that the practical meanings a computer game holds for a player may and do often change in time has been widely documented since the early days of gaming culture. A pioneering account comes from David Sudnow’s (1983, 32–56) phenomenological exploration of Breakout (1976), as the author first describes the computer game merely as a thing that he played “just for kicks,” later evolving into something that he explicitly uses to satisfy the daily “need for competition,” ultimately culminating in a stage during which he became:

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**Conclusion**

In the framework that is here considered classical pragmatism, objects are “events with meanings” (Dewey 1929, 318): our surroundings turn into objects as we interact with them, and so grant them with meanings of practice. These meanings, in turn, “existentially occurring are ideas [i.e.] apprehensions of meanings” (303–305): our experiences of interacting with meaningful objects generate ideas of them that guide us in re-approaching such objects in the future. In this rubric, the computer game appears in two conceptual forms: as practical ideas of the thing (one’s preconception of what it is and does), and as a thing with practical meanings (what it actually does to one when playing it). This applies to the computer game both as a general concept (when speaking of an unspecified computer game) and as a particular instance of that concept (when speaking of a specific computer game). From the above, four culturally relevant conclusions can be drawn.

A1 There are no right or wrong practical ideas of the computer game. The diversity of practical ideas that people have of the computer game typically reflect the distinct conditions and environments in which people live, and hence a practical idea that is useful for one may not be useful for another. For instance, it might make sense for a Japanese otaku to conceptualize the computer game (TV geemu) as a practical idea that is strongly tied to what happens in dating simulations, visual novels, and other culturally explicit playthings; and yet, a Western casual gamer might find that idea impractical in their life. A good practical idea is one that works for those who have it.
A. Following the above, some practical ideas of the computer game are more popular than others. While people have differing preconceptions of the computer game, it would be possible to statistically estimate which of those preconceptions are common, uncommon, and rare. In the same way that preconceptions of the medical “disease” has been found to differ somewhat radically among laypeople, doctors, nurses, and parliament members (Tikkinen et al 2012), the preconceptions of the computer game likely resonate with the differences and similarities within factors such as age, economic, gender, region, and social status.

B. There are no right or wrong practical meanings of the computer game. People engage and interact with computer games in different ways of equal meaning potential. That said, most computer games have been designed to persuade their players toward specific attitudes and actions, for which it is possible to qualitatively identify certain “governing” practical meanings for particular computer games based on how people play them. Such title-specific meanings can be investigated qualitatively; a lineage of research that can be traced back to Mary Ann Buckles’ (1985) observations on Adventure (1977) players.

B. Some computer games can be considered more plural in their practical meanings than other computer games. For instance, whereas a text-based single-player computer game like Adventure incites a relatively limited repertoire of attitudes and actions (see Jerz 2007; Karhulahti 2011; Lessard 2015), multiplayer computer games like World of Warcraft (2004) tend to offer wider play spaces that are fitting with a more diverse set of attitudes and actions (see Yee 2006; Linderoth & Bennerstedt 2007; Tronstad 2008). From this viewpoint, computer games can be perceived through conceptual flatness and roundness, as defined by the diversity of attitudes and actions that players are incited to take in their play (Figure 2).
Acknowledging, observing, and studying a cultural phenomenon like the computer game entails conceptualizing it practically in terms of idea and meaning, respectively. This concerns both computer games as a general cultural entity as well as single instances of computer game culture. As to the latter, the potentials of practical meaning vary depending on the nature of the computer game in question, ultimately determined by the empirical range of incited attitudes and actions. Following John Dewey’s (1929) pragmatic approach to culture at large, this empirical range naturally taxonomizes the perceived world into genres that evolve along with the individuals who engage them:

The immediate qualitative differences of things cannot be recognized without noting that things possessed of these qualitative traits fall into kinds, or families … The presence in things of the generic form renders them knowable. Mind is but the ordered system of all the characters which constitute kinds, differing among men, differing according to differences of organic constitutions (209–210)
The things that form culture(s) have *practical meanings* that correspond with the concrete effects that engaging with them produces in those who engage. Outside that engagement, the things appear to people as *practical ideas*, i.e. subjectively constituted conceptual families of qualitative difference (and similarity) concerning their assumed practical meaning. People are different, and so are their practical ideas. The computer game holds both practical meanings and ideas, and as such constitutes a conceptual family, the existence of which makes conversing, observing, and living with such things possible. This also applies to other cultural objects such as those of music, literature, and sports.

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**Conclusion**

In the framework that is here considered classical pragmatism, objects are “events with meanings” (Dewey 1929, 318): our surroundings turn into objects as we interact with them, and so grant them with meanings of practice. These meanings, in turn, “existentially occurring are ideas [i.e.] apprehensions of meanings” (303–305): our experiences of interacting with meaningful objects generate ideas of them that guide us in re-approaching such objects in the future. In this rubric, the computer game appears in two conceptual forms: as practical ideas of the thing (one’s preconception of what it is and does), and as a thing with practical meanings (what it actually does to one when playing it). This applies to the computer game both as a general concept (when speaking of an unspecified computer game) and as a particular instance of that concept (when speaking of a specific computer game). From the above, four culturally relevant conclusions can be drawn.

A There are no right or wrong practical ideas of the computer game. The diversity of practical ideas that people have of the computer game typically reflect the distinct conditions and environments in which people live, and hence a practical idea that is useful for one may not be useful for another. For instance, it might make sense for a Japanese otaku to conceptualize the computer game (TV geemu) as a practical idea that is strongly tied to what happens in dating simulations, visual novels, and other culturally explicit playthings; and yet, a Western casual gamer might find that idea impractical in their life. A good practical idea is one that works for those who have it.
A. Following the above, some practical ideas of the computer game are more popular than others. While people have differing preconceptions of the computer game, it would be possible to statistically estimate which of those preconceptions are common, uncommon, and rare. In the same way that preconceptions of the medical “disease” has been found to differ somewhat radically among laypeople, doctors, nurses, and parliament members (Tikkinen et al 2012), the preconceptions of the computer game likely resonate with the differences and similarities within factors such as age, economic, gender, region, and social status.

B. There are no right or wrong practical meanings of the computer game. People engage and interact with computer games in different ways of equal meaning potential. That said, most computer games have been designed to persuade their players toward specific attitudes and actions, for which it is possible to qualitatively identify certain “governing” practical meanings for particular computer games based on how people play them. Such title-specific meanings can be investigated qualitatively; a lineage of research that can be traced back to Mary Ann Buckles’ (1985) observations on *Adventure* (1977) players.

B. Some computer games can be considered more plural in their practical meanings than other computer games. For instance, whereas a text-based single-player computer game like *Adventure* incites a relatively limited repertoire of attitudes and actions (see Jerz 2007; Karhulahti 2011; Lessard 2015), multiplayer computer games like *World of Warcraft* (2004) tend to offer wider play spaces that are fitting with a more diverse set of attitudes and actions (see Yee 2006; Linderoth & Bennerstedt 2007; Tronstad 2008). From this viewpoint, computer games can be perceived through conceptual *flatness* and *roundness*, as defined by the diversity of attitudes and actions that players are incited to take in their play (Figure 2).
Acknowledging, observing, and studying a cultural phenomenon like the computer game entails conceptualizing it practically in terms of idea and meaning, respectively. This concerns both computer games as a general cultural entity as well as single instances of computer game culture. As to the latter, the potentials of practical meaning vary depending on the nature of the computer game in question, ultimately determined by the empirical range of incited attitudes and actions. Following John Dewey’s (1929) pragmatic approach to culture at large, this empirical range naturally taxonomizes the perceived world into genres that evolve along with the individuals who engage them:

The immediate qualitative differences of things cannot be recognized without noting that things possessed of these qualitative traits fall into kinds, or families … The presence in things of the generic form renders them knowable. Mind is but the ordered system of all the characters which constitute kinds, differing among men, differing according to differences of organic constitutions (209–210)
The things that form culture(s) have *practical meanings* that correspond with the concrete effects that engaging with them produces in those who engage. Outside that engagement, the things appear to people as *practical ideas*, i.e. subjectively constituted conceptual families of qualitative difference (and similarity) concerning their assumed practical meaning. People are different, and so are their practical ideas. The computer game holds both practical meanings and ideas, and as such constitutes a conceptual family, the existence of which makes conversing, observing, and living with such things possible. This also applies to other cultural objects such as those of music, literature, and sports.

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**References**


