

Chapter 16

Gamer Talk: Becoming Impenetrably Efficient

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study of student game play is presented, describing how game player communication becomes increasingly complex, efficient, and impenetrable by those who have not actively played the game. Transcripts of gathered video tape reveal how student 'gamer talk' became increasingly implicit, using terminology provided by the game and their shared context of playing the game. Over time, communication among game player group members generally became more efficient and less penetrable by members outside the group (such as new players), as players engaged in culture-building activities around their shared context. However, players occasionally became more explicit in their communication when grounding was required to reach shared meaning, such as in instances where players disagreed on the purpose of a particular game feature or strategy. Finally, implications are offered to suggest ways in which gamer cultures can be made more accessible to game designers and those guiding classroom interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Game design involves the delicate balance of many variables, including the balance of tradeoffs between elements such as gameplay and story (consider for example the ludology vs. narratology

debates). Serious and educational game designers have additional tradeoffs to consider, as games serving these purposes often become less 'fun' as weighty goals are given more explicit attention. However, many well-received games have been developed that manage to balance competing design decisions, resulting in a game that is both addicting to play yet serves long-term functional

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gratifications: whether those be learning a concept, socializing, or just having fun.

In this chapter, we will examine the communicative behavior among gamers and discuss how gaming activities and the environment shape the communicative process. Specifically we will examine how gamers playing collaboratively will develop an increasingly implicit communicative style that will allow for more efficient collaborative behavior. A side effect of developing an implicit, context-bound communicative style, however, is that the gamers' communicative behavior will become increasingly difficult to process by others not involved directly in the game. Consequently gamers can find themselves becoming part of a somewhat closed culture, simultaneously united by and isolated by those able to "talk the talk."

A qualitative case study examining learning within games will be used to provide illustrations of this phenomenon. The study took place in a high-school setting wherein pairs of students were asked to play a number of sessions of PC-based computer games. A video record of students engaged in collaborative gameplay was collected, as the students played *Civilization IV*, *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3*, and *Making History: The Calm & the Storm*. These video records were then transcribed and analyzed to observe the development of 'gamer talk,' or game-specific communicative behavior that emerged as the learners became more familiar with the games and their learning partners.

As previously stated, game designers have many sensitive design decisions to make in order to balance various gameplay elements; tradeoffs must be considered so that the overall objectives of the game are best supported. The present analysis should be of use to game designers, as much of the terminology and implicit communicative behavior that emerge among game players are functions of terms provided by the game itself. Much of the in-game activity and sequences of actions acquire names that are given by the game itself or based upon specific behaviors and visualizations presented by the game. However, over-designing

can inhibit the development of game-specific cultures, as games might become too inflexible, yielding environments where the investment of identity (e.g., Gee, 2003) and community-building activities are less likely to occur.

To lay the groundwork for an examination of the transcripts, it will be necessary to provide some background as to the forces that influence the use of explicit or implicit communicative behavior across various circumstances. A discussion of the cooperative nature of communication (Clark, 1996) will be offered, with particular emphasis on Grice's theory of conversational implicature. The concept of *common ground* – particularly within the gaming framework (Monk, 2003) – will be addressed along with the process of *grounding*. Searle's (1975) ideas about *speech acts* will also be discussed. These explanations for variance in implicit and explicit communicative behavior will motivate analyses of the study transcripts from a specific situated gaming environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to illustrate how gamers' communicative behavior becomes increasingly context dependent, efficient, and more difficult to process by those not directly involved in the game. Implications for both game designers and teachers (curriculum designers) will be offered to describe strategies for content creation and implementation that yield efficient community building and penetrable game cultures for new game players.

BACKGROUND

An interdisciplinary approach to the research that follows was inspired by several important traditions, which will be discussed below. Analyses in this chapter were part of a qualitative, inductive, open-ended study of learning and communication during gameplay.

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