

Chapter 4

Game Design and the Challenge–Avoiding, Self–Validator Player Type

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ABSTRACT

Achiever and Explorer player types are well known in MMOs and educational games. Players who enjoy being a winner, but dislike hard challenges (“Self-Validators”) are a heretofore ignored but commonly occurring player type. Self-Validators worry about and are distressed by failing. They can simply avoid playing overly difficult games for entertainment. But in a required learning game, Self-Validators’ excessive worry about failing can interfere with learning. The authors consider whether and how eight very different modern games accommodate Explorers, Achievers, and Self-Validators and discuss implications for entertainment and learning game design and research. Seven of eight diverse games analyzed primarily served either the Explorer or Achiever player type. Self-Validators were partially accommodated in some Achiever-oriented games, through user-selectable difficulty. Design with all three types in mind would encourage inclusion of features that enable players to optimize their preferred style of play.

INTRODUCTION

Players who play a particular game purely by choice presumably do so because they derive satisfaction from playing that game. Individual

gamers differ in which games they choose to play, how often, when, and for how long (Dawson, Craig, Taylor & Toombs, 2007). Individuals’ preferred games and genres are probably associated with their enjoyment of the achievement

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and exploration pleasures provided by those games and genres. Many genres tend to be more closely associated with one or the other of those motivations. Achievement is the central paradigm in genres such as First-Person Shooters (FPSs), Fighting, Racing, Sports, and Action. Other genres such as Adventure, Strategy, RPG, Puzzle, and Simulation probably appeal more to Explorers because they interweave imagination, curiosity, and customization.

As digital games for entertainment expand to new audiences and playing games with a purpose beyond entertainment become required rather than voluntary, perspectives on player types must also grow. Players who play a game because they are required to (as is the case with games for the classroom or training games) or because they should (for example, physical or cognitive exercise games) are rarely afforded a choice of genre, or of which game to play, or even whether or not to play. Games for which play is required serve reluctant as well as eager players.

Achievers and *Explorers* are player types found in MMOs and educational games (Bartle, 2006; Heeter & Winn, 2008). Achievers are motivated by extrinsic rewards such as leveling up and earning high scores. Explorers are motivated by intrinsic factors such as curiosity, role play, and learning. Educational research on mindset and motivation reveal two distinctly different mechanisms of extrinsic motivation (Dweck, 2006; Lepper & Henderlong, 2000). Performance-approach learners are bored by easy tasks. They enjoy the thrill of mastering hard challenges and welcome good grades and teacher approval as just rewards (Elliot & Church, 1997). Performance-avoidance learners are anxious about failing. When performance-avoidance students perform graded tasks, they aspire to prove themselves, to validate their worth rather than aspiring to learn. They prefer easy challenges where success is likely over harder challenges where they might fail.

In this article we propose that Self-Validators are a heretofore ignored, but commonly occur-

ring player type. We consider whether and how eight very different modern games accommodate Explorers, Achievers, and Self-Validators and discuss implications for entertainment and learning game design.

MOTIVATION AND LEARNING

Extrinsic Motivation and Learning

Formal education tends to be structured to use the threat of poor grades to motivate homework and learning. At the beginning of a semester or school year, teachers describe how standardized grades will be fairly assigned. Students are expected to do what is necessary to “pass” or better yet, to excel on the exams and other kinds of performances. Report cards document standardized achievement, informing students and parents about the learner’s performance. In the context of this kind of achievement-focused education, learning scientists have looked at the impact of achievement orientation on learning. Achievement or goal orientation refers to how individuals perceive and respond to achievement situations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). People who have a high achievement motivation enjoy challenges much more than those with a low achievement motivation (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003).

Elliot and Church (1997) considered two quite different reasons individuals might have for pursuing extrinsic, performance goals such as grades. Performance-approach goals are linked to displaying competence and earning a favorable judgment. Performance-avoidance goals focus on trying to avoid failure. Elliot and Church found positive outcomes for performance-approach goals including positive emotions and absorption in the given task. Performance-avoidance prompted efforts to escape potential consequences of failure and was associated with anxiety. Performance-avoidance interfered with mental focus, blocking the individual’s ability to concentrate and become

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