

Chapter 13

What Players Like about Video Games: Prediction of Video Game Playing through Quality Perceptions and Player Types

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ABSTRACT

Video game developers make multimillion dollar decisions based on hunches, personal experience, and iteration. A theoretical model of video game player behavior – how one chooses, plays, and evaluate games – can provide an important framework for these decisions. According to social cognitive theory, one's behavior can be understood as the result of expected outcomes resulting from direct and observational learning processes. Video game players use symbolic representations (quality perceptions) of their direct and observed experiences with video games to build expectations of whether playing a specific video game will satisfy their needs. A series of in-depth interviews and a subsequent survey with students of a large mid-western university was conducted to enumerate groups of similar players (player types), and video game quality perceptions. Both concepts were used to provide empirical evidence for a model to predict video game playing. Results show that, in prediction models, the best player types are those that include player type-specific quality perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Video games¹ continue to grow in popularity. In 1998, Video games generated 4.8 billion dollars in sales. By 2009, sales grew to 10.5 billion dollars (Entertainment Software Association,

2008, 2010). This 119% increase is even more remarkable in light of sluggish global economy in many other sectors. And this growth doesn't cover pirated, subscription based, and online games. People who have grown up with games are called the “gaming generation” (Beck & Wade, 2004). Games are a growing, cultural force to be reckoned with. What is it about video games that

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What Players Like about Video Games

make them so popular? Why do certain people play certain games and enjoy playing them? What is important to players when they chose to play a video game for entertainment? How can game developers understand their “audience” better to create better games?

Traditionally, media scholars have addressed these important questions with various theories and models of media use and media enjoyment. Those theories and models span from explorative media-user types (e.g. Espe & Seiwert, 1986), the uses and gratification paradigm (Rosengreen, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengreen, 1985), selective exposure theory (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), to general theories of human happiness, balance, and well-being such as flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sherry, 2004) or self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meanwhile, all these perspectives have been applied to video game play.

For example, Bartle (1996, 2004) created a player-type model for MUDs (“multi-user dungeons”, a primitive precursor to modern online games) in which players with similar motivations were observed to behave similarly in the game. He found four principle types of players: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers. Players within each of these groups are characterized by distinct behaviors and game playing motivations. Based on a large online survey, Yee (2006) updated Bartle’s work and identified a five factor model of MMORPGs (Massively Multi-user Online Role-Playing Games, graphical descendants of MUDs) play motivations. People seem to play MMORPGs because they want to achieve goals, build relationships to others, become immersed in a virtual world that can be manipulated and used to escape the real-world.

Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, and Lachlan (2006) constructed a uses and gratifications model of player motivation to predict video game preference and use. In its original version, the uses and gratification paradigms posits that basic needs, individual differences, and contextual societal

factors combine to result in a variety of perceived problems and motivations to which gratifications are sought from media (here video games) leading to differential patterns of media use (cf. Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengreen, 1985; Rosengreen, 1974). Guided by this assumption Sherry et al. (2005) found arousal, challenge, competition, diversion, fantasy and social interaction as the most relevant motivational dimensions of video game playing. These findings mirrored the results of early uses and gratifications based video game studies (cf. Selnow, 1984; Wigand, Borstelmann, & Boister, 1985).

Other recent uses and gratifications studies (cf. Griffiths, 1991; Phillips, Rolls, Rouse, & Griffiths, 1995; Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2003) added more general video game play motivations such as “to pass time”, “to avoid doing other things”, and “to cheer oneself up”, which correspond to the notion that video games (and entertainment media in general) are primarily used to regulate emotions as suggested by selective exposure theory and Zillmann & Bryant’s (1985) affect-dependent theory of stimulus arrangement (see also Zillmann, 1988). This theory assumes that (1) people are motivated to minimize exposure to negative, aversive stimuli and to maximize positive, pleasurable stimuli, and (2) that we learn through prior experience to associate media content with emotional outcomes. In simple terms, we watch enjoyable television programs, read entertaining books, use the internet for entertainment, and play fun video games when we know it makes us feel good and we can successfully manage our moods by using media. Following this rationale, Bryant and Davis (2006) demonstrate that all four sub-processes of selective exposure theory, i.e. excitatory homeostasis, intervention potential, message-behavioral affinity, and hedonic valence can be observed when people play video games and thus it may be justified to assume that video games are particularly potent mood managers (see also Grodal, 2000).

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