

Enjoyment or Engagement? Role of Social Interaction in Playing Massively Multitplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGS)

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Abstract. Based on data collected through 40 in-depth interviews, it is found that (a) the balance between perceived challenges and skills, and (b) the types of in-game social interactions can both facilitate and impede the enjoyment of game playing. Through these two factors, a conclusive link was also found between game enjoyments and a gamer's engagement level. Engaged gamers experience optimal enjoyment more frequently and value the importance of social interactions more than non-engaged gamers. In addition, game enjoyment can be enhanced through game design and it can also be adversely affected by real world contextual factors and technical difficulties. More importantly, the study underlines the importance of social interaction. Social interaction is the key factor that determines the level of engagement of gamers. For engaged gamers, social interaction is essential in this gaming experience. For non-engaged gamers, social interaction is not important and they have little tolerance of negative social interaction within the game.

Keywords: MMORPG, engagement, enjoyment

1 Introduction

Enjoyment is a complex experience, and it likely reflects the intersection of a variety of factors, including cognitive, affective, social and physiological elements [7]. Previous studies on enjoyment [7] typically explored the enjoyment of traditional media, such as books, music, film and television viewing. They overlooked the uprising new media, computer games. Poole [10] argues that games are finally becoming accepted as a mature medium for entertainment. Online game is an extremely successful new medium with arguably the greatest significance for the everyday consumption of new

media [8]. The current study investigates entertainment, enjoyment and engagement of playing Massively Multitplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs).

1.1 Current Research Trend

Current literatures on MMORPGs address three main aspects: the structural aspects of the game, the effects and impacts of gaming, and the gamers. Studies focus on the game features and the structural aspects of games sought to find out the preferred elements of the game [2]. However, these studies only elaborated on the features preferred, without considering why gamers were using these features and how they affected the enjoyment of the game itself.

Studies focus on the effects of gaming explore both possible positive [5] and negative [1] impacts of gaming. Negative effects include violence, aggression, and addiction [14]. Besides investigating the negative impact of gaming, positive effects of video gaming have also been examined. Green and Bavelier [5] found that non players trained on an action video game show marked improvement in their perceptual and motor skills compared to their pre-training abilities.

Studies focused on gamers have typically focused on gamers' motivations [4] [8]. One common reason that ran across all the studies is the social interaction that gamers have within the game. The challenge and competition that the game poses is another important motivation. Other factors include the ability for gamers to immerse or escape into the fantasy world that the game provides. Some studies focusing on the gamer themselves have developed player typologies and explored the profile of the online gamer [14], while others studied the virtual communities that gamers have forged within the gaming world of MMORPGs [3] [12]. Other studies differentiated gamers according to their engagement level with online games. However, the reasons behind such different levels of engagement have not yet been explored. This study therefore focuses on gamers' enjoyment and engagement of playing MMORPGs.

1.2. Enjoyment of MMORPG

Several key factors influence the enjoyment of MMORPG: Social interaction, the ratio between gamers' skills and the difficulty of the game, and anti-enjoyment factors.

Social interaction in MMORPGs forms an intrinsic part of game play, as compared to other computer or online game genres such as adventure games. This social aspect of MMORPGs, referring to the ability of gamers to construct friendships, build communities and engage in social interactions in the virtual world, is often stated as one of the reasons for the increasing popularity of MMORPGs [4] [8].

Previous studies have also utilized the conceptual framework of Flow Theory to gain a better understanding of games [2] [10] [13]. Flow theory addresses the relationship between the skills of the player and the difficulty of the game. Dimensions include: apathy, anxiety, flow and relaxation. However, none of the studies explored

the enjoyment of playing games while recognizing and emphasizing the importance of social interactions within the game

Past research also fails to address factors that disrupt the flow and enjoyment of gaming. Studies have shown that gamers who have experienced flow are more likely to be addicted [2]. By finding out the factors that would obstruct game flow, the link between sustained game play and enjoyment could be exploited, and excessive gaming controlled.

1.3 Research Focus

To summarize, the enjoyment and engagement of playing MMORPGs provides an important, overriding explanation for why people continue to play games. Enjoyment has been found to be a factor that determines media usage [4]. However, previous research focused only on motivations, [4] [8], and overlooked the concept of enjoyment and engagement, as well as the circumstances promoting it. Therefore, the present study addresses three research questions: What makes the experience of playing MMORPGs enjoyable? How do the factors influencing enjoyment explain a gamer's level of engagement? What are the factors that disrupt MMORPG enjoyment?

2 Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide a holistic account of the participants' gaming experiences. Forty participants (20 each for non-engaged and engaged gamers), 31 male and 9 female, age 14 to 27, were subsequently selected for in-depth interview. Non-engaged gamers spend an average of 10 to 12 hours per week on online gaming, while engaged gamers spend an average of 35 to 37 hours per week on online gaming. The MMORPGs they played are Maple Story, World of Warcraft, Ragnarok Online, Conquer Online, City of Heroes, Guild Wars, Goonzu and MU Online.

Interview questions were formulated based on the theoretical framework of flow theory and in-game social interactions. All interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using constant comparison method [7].

3 Results

Enjoyment of playing MMORPGs is influenced by a variety of factors. It is found that both the ratio of challenge to skills and the types of social interactions one has within the game can both enhance and disrupt the gaming experience.

Figure 1 shows how each factor affects enjoyment, as well as the level of engagement with the game.

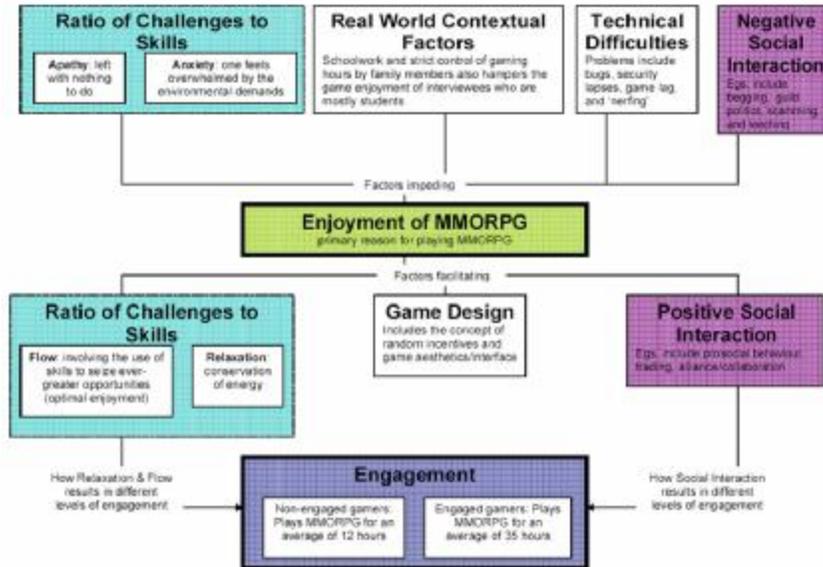


Fig. 1. Factors Facilitating and Impeding Game Enjoyment

3.1 Factors Facilitating Game Enjoyment

Factors that promote enjoyment include the experiential states of flow (where perceived challenge equals perceived skills and both are higher than an individual's subjective mean) and relaxation (where skills are perceived as greater than challenges), game design and positive social interactions. Positive social interaction include behaviors such as prosocial behavior, collaboration, and inter-mingling.

3.2 Factors Impeding Game Enjoyment

Other factors that disrupt enjoyment include the experiential states of apathy (where perceived challenge equals perceived skills but both are lower than an individual's subjective mean) and anxiety (where perceived challenges are greater than skills), real world contextual factors, technical difficulties, as well as negative social interactions. Negative social interactions include behaviors such as begging, bullying, scamming, guild politics and leeching.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Social interaction within MMORPGs is of paramount importance, influencing both the enjoyment and the level of engagement that a gamer has. The enjoyment that gamers derive from the game is affected by the level of skills and challenges perceived by the gamer, positive social interactions and the game design. When the level of skills and challenge as perceived by the gamer is higher than the subjective mean, the experiential state of flow/deep enjoyment is achieved within the game. Game enjoyment can also be derived from the experiential state of relaxation where skills are perceived to be much higher than the level of challenges. Enjoyment is greatly enhanced when the game provides opportunities for pleasurable social interactions such as grouping and socializing, resulting in the formation of social ties. A reinforcing stimulus is built into the game design, through the random nature of drops and rewards. This built up of anticipation for future rewards as gamers are never sure when the next essential item will be dropped, adds on to their enjoyment and tempts gamers to game even further.

Especially important is the link between social interaction and engagement. Non-engaged gamers found social interaction a waste of time and a hindrance to their game play. Conversely all engaged gamers valued social interactions within the game and stated that it was both important and enjoyable. Engaged gamers who spend more time and energy in game are more likely to experience flow. However, high engagement of game playing does not necessarily lead to the problem of gaming addiction. This may be due to self-regulation exercised by the gamers who purposefully control their gaming habit even though they are enjoying the game.

Anti-enjoyment factors include the experiential states of apathy and anxiety, negative social interactions, real world contextual factors and technical difficulties. Apathy occurs when skills and challenges are both below the subjective mean, while anxiety sets in when the challenges presented are too difficult for the gamers to deal with. Real world contextual factors such as interference by family members or disturbance through phone calls can also disrupt gamers' gaming experience. In addition, enjoyment of the game is also compromised when technical problems crop up, such as hacking, bugs and game lag.

In conclusion, a) the balance between perceived challenges and skills, and (b) the types of in-game social interaction influence the enjoyment and engagement of playing MMORPG. Social interaction is what determines gamers' engagement level. Engaged gamers view social interaction as an essential part of gaming experience. Non-engaged gamers do not value social interaction and have little tolerance for negative social interaction within the game. Future research should aim to gain a holistic understanding of the different types of in-game social interaction.

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