

Insights into Learning Offered by the Dispositions of Second-Generation “Newbie” Gamers

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Abstract

Concerns about the content of videogames continue to hold media attention, but researchers like Gee (2003) and Thomas and Brown (2007, 2011) have dug deeper in order to explore how the merging of play and learning within game structures encourages learning and a “gamer disposition” (Brown and Thomas, 2008). Building on research into communities in computer-mediated spaces (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Rheingold, 2000; Taylor, 2006; Turkle, 1995), this paper argues that the majority of *World of Warcraft* players are not stereotypical “first-generation” gamers but are instead “second-generation” gamers who are new to online game spaces and do not have a firm grasp of gaming culture or a gamer disposition. By examining their gameplay styles, social interaction, and entry into gaming culture, the dispositions of second-generation gamers contrast with “the gamer disposition;” however, as these players become more invested in gaming culture, they can develop a first-generation disposition.

Introduction

Concerns about the content of entertainment available on the Internet and through videogames are a continuing source for media attention. In recent years, researchers like Gee (2003) have dug deeper than content to explore how the structure of a game itself can encourage learning. Thomas and Brown (2007) examined the mindset that is encouraged by play:

More than simply a means to learning, play is a way of thinking about more than what we know. It is, following Gilbert Ryle’s (1949) notion of mind, a disposition toward the world, a way of not only seeing the world but of seeing ourselves in it and the various possibilities that the world presents (pp. 156).

In 2008, Brown and Thomas list how the learned dispositions that gamers develop would benefit employers, specifically outlining the traits acquired through the merging of play and learning within the socially created environment within the game space.

In this paper, I look at differences in dispositions between “first-generation” gamers, like those discussed by Brown and Thomas (2008), and newer and more common “second-generation” game players who are entering the game space without a firm grasp of gaming culture. These second-generation players generally do not react to the game or to other players like more experienced players and are often labeled as “newbies,” in reference to their poor playing skills—to first-generation gamers, second-generation gamers are simply playing the game wrong. The friction between first-generation and second-generation gamers offer insights

not only into what behaviors are expected and are missing on the part of the second-generation gamer, but also how the general dispositions of thinking differ between the two groups and what that suggests about a the second-generation gamer disposition.

Second-Generation Gamers

From its advent, game studies researchers have described the culture that develops within a community of game players (e.g. Rheingold, 1993/2000; Turkle, 1995). Gamer culture is the topic of in-depth anthropological inquiries (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006), as well as academic journals, e.g. *ELUDAMOS Journal of Computer Game Culture* (Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab) and *Games and Culture* (SAGE). However, within the past five years, the number of digital game players has increased, as well as news and media coverage increasing the public's awareness of "gamer culture." The cultural norms and idiosyncrasies of these virtual communities have been a point of entry for many researchers, myself included (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Kelly, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006). However, in this paper I argue that as videogames have become a more popular and accessible form of entertainment, the majority of players in even the massively multiplayer online (MMO) games are no longer "hardcore" gamers who have a strong connection with gamer culture. This paper strives to make a distinction between first-generation hardcore gamers who play games within the cultural framework described by previous games studies scholars, and second-generation gamers who are only familiar with the culture and conventions of gaming from an outsider's perspective.

The defining characteristics of second-generation are based, not on the amount of time they spend playing, e.g., Juul's (2010) "casual" gamer, but on their gameplay behaviors and their interest in and ability to immerse themselves in the dominant gamer culture of the first-generation gamers. Second-generation gamers:

- Are not hardcore gamers. *World of Warcraft* is generally their first MMO.
- Don't have the latest computers and may not have a fast Internet connection.
- Focus on leveling, questing, and exploration, rather than complex end-game content.
- Have little to no understanding of game mechanics.
- Feel disconnected from gamer stereotypes about gender, age, and ethnicity. Second-generation gamers are parents, grandparents, Caucasian, Asians, Latinos, African Americans, heterosexual, lesbian, and gay.
- Often break the norms of gamer culture in language and actions.

There is an inherent conflict between the playing styles of first- and second-generation gamers. First-generation gamers have little patience for players who do not know what they should be doing; hence, they refer to second-generation gamers as newbies—noobs, nubs, n00bs, newbs, etc. First-generation gamers see themselves as the elite, dedicated few who have watched their game from its birthing pains to the present. To them, second-generation gamers are interlopers, people jumping onto the bandwagon after *World of Warcraft* is "cool." First-generation gamers are not subtle about their feelings of superiority, but second-generation

gamers bring their own interests to the game and play it their own way. Why “crunch the numbers” and do all the “math stuff” to make your character better when someone else has already done it? Why collect multiple pieces of rare equipment to compare their stats when other users have already compiled “Best in Slot” gear lists? The challenge is not about exploring the min-max aspects of the game, but about experiencing its richness to the fullest. It’s a different kind of challenge because second-generation gamers are, essentially, playing a different game within a game.

Identifying Second-Generation Gamers

For this study, I focused on Activision Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft*. Initial probes were conducted during the first few months after the release of *World of Warcraft* in 2004, while the main research was conducted between 2005 and 2009. The data was collected using an ethnographic exploration of communication and social interactions in *World of Warcraft* and in-depth interviews with 105 players.

As a case-study videogame in the MMO genre, *World of Warcraft* is a popular game with a well-developed game culture. McGonigal (2011) described the enthusiastic participation of players in the community, saying “They’re the *World of Warcraft* fans who are so intent on mastering the challenges of their favorite game that, collectively, they’ve written a quarter of a million wiki articles on the WoWWiki—creating the single largest wiki after Wikipedia” (p. 2). Combined with an active player community, after its release in late 2004, *World of Warcraft* had a massive surge in subscriptions to play the game and included incentives for people who would not normally play an MMO to try the game. This brought in a lot of new players. In Castronova’s (2005) book, he noted that “Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* broke single-day PC game sales records at its release on November 23, 2004. As this book goes to press, it is on target to reach several hundred thousand subscribers” (p. 134). In contrast, by 2010, Blizzard Entertainment announced that they had 12 million *World of Warcraft* subscribers worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). Although Castronova was only estimating the potential popularity of the game, his guess actually suggests the number of gamers in 2004 who would be likely to play a game like this—the first-generation gamers who are deeply immersed in gamer culture. When compared to the total number of players, even if “several hundred thousand” is interpreted as 400,000 players, that number of first-generation players is less than 5% of the whole. This begs the question: Who are the other 95%? These newbie second-generation gamers are a strong presence within *World of Warcraft*, making this particular game an excellent space within which to examine this understudied group of players.

The specific subjects were selected through a combination of two elements: identifiable gameplay habits made apparent by the structure of play in *World of Warcraft* and my own gameplay choices. During the course of this research, I changed game servers multiple times for work and personal reasons and generally leveled multiple characters per server. The choices I made to limit my deep connections to one server, one guild, or one character became an integral component of my research methodology and contained several benefits. First, I spent a lot of time “pugging”—playing with pick-up groups (PUGs) of random players in the area or players doing the same activity I wanted to do. This meant I was frequently exposed to new players, rather than maintaining a more consistent relationship with a fixed set of players. Second, I was often a solo player, which made me appear more available for conversation and for joining forces with other people in the same in-game area. Third, while leveling new characters, I met a large number of my subjects in areas of the game geared toward characters in the 40s and 50s levels,

or, after the level caps had been raised, in the 60s or 70s levels. Players who were just trying the game and did not like it rarely made it to these levels, while the first-generation players already knew the most efficient means of gaining experience and quickly leveled out of these areas, often recruiting a higher level member of their guild to help them “power level” faster. That left players who did not know the areas or the quests because they were hitting this level for the first time, often because they had purchased *World of Warcraft* late, after hearing friends/siblings/significant others raving about what a fun game it was. These second-generation gamers, who in many cases seemed to be playing a different game than the one my first-generation gamer friends discussed, became the subjects of this research.

The Gamer Disposition

Brown and Thomas (2008) examined the mindset that is encouraged by the kind of coordinated play that takes place within a MMO like *World of Warcraft*. Talking about first-generation gamers, Brown and Thomas describe the gamer disposition as “more than attitudes or beliefs, these attributes are character traits that players bring into the gamer worlds and that those worlds reinforce” (§2). According to Brown and Thomas, the gamer disposition has five key attributes.

Gamers:

- “are bottom-line oriented” (§3).
- “understand the power of diversity” (§5).
- “thrive on change” (§7).
- “see learning as fun” (§9).
- “marinate on the ‘edge’” (§11), i.e., experiment with crazy solutions to problems.

Contrary to stereotypes about gamers being lazy and unreliable people, Brown and Thomas’ analysis of the disposition of gamers indicated that they are goal-oriented, engaged, creative, and dedicated. They argue that gamers make the kind of committed and creative employees that businesses should look for in their hiring practices.

The Second-Generation Gamer Disposition

Unlike first-generation gamers, second-generation gamers who have not yet assimilated gamer culture exhibit a disposition more passive, easy, predictable, and requiring an on-demand schedule. Following the structure of Brown and Thomas’ (2008) gamer disposition, second-generation gamers prefer ease-of-use, embody diversity, thrive on consistency, learn only what is necessary, and rely on proven solutions.

They are ease-of-use oriented

Second-generation gamers are not interested in working too hard. This is entertainment, not work. These are players with full-time jobs, families, and friends. They prefer to find a balance between the game and their other activities. They are looking for an enjoyable diversion from life, something they can plug into when they have free time, but they are not looking for the commitment of consistent playing or the dedication of nightly raiding. They resent anything that interferes with the entertainment elements of the game. This includes technical factors like

Internet connectivity problems and program glitches, or design features like grinding for long periods of time, or social factors like griefers or spammers. They are willing to consider shortcuts to success that first-generation gamers find offensive. Gold farmers sell gold to second-generation gamers.

They embody diversity, but practice autonomy

Physically, second-generation gamers are more diverse from the stereotype. While there have always been exceptions to the young, Caucasian male norm, second-generation gamers push the edges in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Second-generation gamers also embody diversity in-game. Where the structure of the game encourages and enforces collaboration through the Tank-Healer-DPS triangle or through crafting, second-generation gamers want to do it all on their own. They try many different character classes and gravitate toward balanced, self-sufficient classes that can solo. They create alts to level all of the crafts to limit reliance on other players.

On the surface, dabbling in many character classes and trying different aspects of the game seems similar to the Explorer (first-generation) player type described by Bartle (1996). The difference lies in the depth of exploration. First-generation Explorers are driven to fully map out aspects of the game. In *World of Warcraft*, these kinds of first-generation players might fill in the entire world map, level three different versions of the same character class to try all the available options, or repeatedly attack (x+1) number of mobs to determine the limits of their character's ability. In contrast, second-generation gamers are driven more by curiosity and the desire to be self-sufficient. They explore multiple character classes, but not fully—they will often have multiple characters at low to mid-levels, especially characters that are more difficult to level outside a group, like warriors and priests.

They thrive on consistency

For second-generation gamers, videogames are a chance to relax and unwind, not a foray into the unknown. Changes to the game system are upsetting and frustrating. A player in her 60s told me she quit *World of Warcraft* and had no interest in playing again because of changes in the latest expansion, despite the fact that her son and husband both played. "They changed the maps again. I had enough trouble getting around before without them changing the maps on me."

They learn only what is necessary

Second-generation gamers want to learn how something works quickly, and then not have to think about it again. They have little desire to explore the underlying structures of the game and many players are happy to follow the lead of experienced players, more concerned with overcoming the obstacle than in learning why or how it was defeated. For example, very few second-generation gamers are familiar with the *World of Warcraft* game lore because it is not integral to playing the game.

They rely on proven solutions

Second-generation gamers trust that first-generation gamers have already generated answers and strategies for in-game challenges. They utilize guild chat and general chat as a forum for questions on where to find items or how to complete quests. If they are more comfortable with technology, they pick a knowledge database like www.wowwiki.com and refer to it to answer all of their questions, but they rarely contribute information or comment on forums.

Gamer Culture and the Gamer Disposition

The second-generation version of the gamer disposition looks more like general media consumption than a specialized mindset learned by playing videogames. Second-generation gamers are, in essence, strangers coming into the gaming space and slowly learning how to behave like a gamer. Some never learn, but others start investing themselves into gaming culture. These second-generation gamers begin to understand what behaviors are expected of them, and learn about the underlying mathematical calculations of the game structure. They are likely to join a guild and eventually learn how to “walk” and “talk” like a first-generation gamer. As these second-generation players become more immersed in gaming culture, they develop game play behaviors that are more similar to Brown and Thomas’ (2008) gamer disposition. Therefore, rather than contradicting Brown and Thomas’ research, this paper supports their findings by suggesting that the gamer disposition can be taught to players through the combination of play and learning found in *World of Warcraft*.

Future Directions

As gaming increases in popularity, the gamer culture discussed by the media and studied by games researchers will continue to change and develop. This paper uses the playing habits of second-generation gamers to identify them both as distinct from first-generation gamers, and as a group who can tell us something new about what players learn from videogames; however, the numerical order of the generations is meant to describe a players’ entry into videogame playing culture, not how long they have been playing videogames. Some second-generation players will morph into first-generation players as their investment into and understanding of videogames increases. I also anticipate a third-generation wave of players who have a different set of conceptions about what it means to be a gamer and may approach a game like *World of Warcraft* from a different perspective, leading to a third flavor of gamer disposition. For the moment, the second-generation gamer disposition suggests a way of understanding why different players approach the same game in different ways as well as the fact that the game environment fosters a first-generation gamer disposition.

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