Gaming With New Players: Should You Self-Handicap? Should They Know?

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Abstract: Many tabletop game enthusiasts report not actively pursuing victory when playing with new players in order to provide a positive gaming experience. Does self-handicapping affect the preferences and future play intentions of beginners? In this experiment, an experienced player taught a tabletop game to new players and played with them. Participants (N = 60) were assigned to one of three conditions: control (experienced player actively pursues victory), overt self-handicapping (experienced player restricts her choices and announces this to the new player), and covert self-handicapping (experienced player self-handicaps without telling the new player). Participants then reported their gameplay experiences and their interest in playing it again. We discuss the study results and implications for game-based interventions.

Overview

When we introduce someone to a game for the first time, we hope they will find it engaging, enjoy the challenges and interactions it presents, and want to play in the future. And when we design or adapt games for education, well-being, or social causes, they are more likely to succeed when players want to keep playing after their initial exposure. What features of a first experience with a game matter to the new player's enjoyment and interest?

One way experienced players in multiplayer games attempt to provide an engaging experience is through *self-handicapping*, which involves changing some aspect of the game, or their approach to playing it, so that new players have a chance at victory. There are many ways experienced players can self-handicap, including (a) not fully applying one's effort and knowledge toward winning ("easing up"), (b) trying to win but imposing additional challenges or barriers to victory on oneself, or (c) setting different win conditions for the experienced versus new players or starting new players with a certain number of points at the beginning of the game (e.g., handicaps in golf). In this study, we focus on the second approach, termed by Vossen (2008) as lusory self-handicapping.

Gamers appear to spontaneously engage in self-handicapping when playing with young or inexperienced players. For example, Woods (2012) found that nearly 40% of surveyed hobby board gamers engaged in self-handicapping when teaching new players a game. Respondents stated that they did so to help new players learn the game, facilitate a level playing field, and provide a more enjoyable experience, partly to maximize the likelihood that the new players would enjoy the game and want to play in the future. Similarly, Smith (2006) observed a skilled player self-handicapping in a racing video game by slowing down to prevent a discouraged new player from abandoning the game.

Self-handicapping may be effective in providing an engaging experience and thus foster interest and enjoyment. First, self-handicapping may prevent the frustration of performing poorly or losing badly by calibrating the game challenge to an appropriate level for the new player. As such, self-handicapping can be viewed as an example of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1934) by providing support for new players to learn and begin the process of mastering rules and strategies. Koster (2014) argues that to be fun, games must require players to develop and apply skill, but if games are too difficult, disinterest will result. Thus, until proficiency is reached, challenges should be moderate so as to prevent frustration. Second, self-handicapping may result in a more engaging social experience. A gaming experience is more likely to feel 'shared' from the elusory type of self-handicapping, in that it levels the playing field while still allowing the experienced player to pursue victory. Therefore, we expect that new players will enjoy the game more when the experienced player engages in self-handicapping.

How might a new player's awareness of the self-handicapping behavior influence their experience? While beginners do not wish to lose handily to a more experienced player, they might resist some of the commonly employed self-handicapping approaches (Lanza, 2005). Deci and Flaste (1996) note that "to be intrinsically motivated people need to *perceive themselves* as competent and autonomous" (p. 86, emphasis in original), suggesting that new players may not appreciate obvious self-handicapping as it undermines the inherent challenge in learning the game and restricts their free choice. Thus, we hypothesized that the positive effects of self-handicapping would be stronger when the experienced player self-handicaps in secret, without the new players' knowledge.

Methodology

Participants

Participants (N = 60) were undergraduate psychology majors at a mid-sized public U.S. university who participate in exchange for research credit and a chance to win a tabletop game.

Design, Procedure, and Measures

Each participant learned and played the card game *The Builders: Middle Ages* (Henry, 2013) with an experienced assistant. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *control* (the assistant pursued victory), *overt self-handicapping* (the assistant employed self-handicapping by restricting herself to only 60% of the available cards each turn, and announced this before play began), and *covert self-handicapping condition* (the assistant silently self-handicapped).

After play ended, the participant completed a post-game questionnaire. All outcome measures were designed for the purposes of this study. These included: ease of learning the game, enjoyment of the game, level of effort expended while playing, self-confidence in playing well, evaluation of the game's quality, and motivation to play again. The outcome of the game and participant experience with strategic tabletop games were also assessed. Participation in the study took 30-45 minutes.

Results

Statistical analyses revealed that the participants' experiences and raffle choices did not depend upon whether the assistant self-handicapped (overtly or covertly) or not. Based on their ratings (on a 7-point Likert scale), participants in all three groups reported having fun (M = 6.01, SD = .85), trying hard to win (M = 5.88, SD = 1.12), liking the game (M = 5.38, SD = 1.07), and being interested in playing again (M = 5.69, SD = 1.07). The game outcome (who won, margin of victory) also did not impact participants' experiences. Interestingly, the participant evaluated the game more favorably if they happened to know the assistant personally ($t(58) = 2.16$, $p < .05$, d = .57), and participants who reported being familiar with strategic games and enjoying board/card games more were more likely to enjoy the experience, be confident in their play, and want to play again.

Discussion

There are several plausible reasons why participants had a positive experience regardless of the condition or the outcome of the game. For example, new players may expect to perform poorly relative to an experienced player, and may not be discouraged by losing. Also, the game we studied has little direct conflict between players (cf., chess, *Risk*); perhaps self-handicapping is more important in such contexts. Our assistants also consistently created a pleasant gaming experience (e.g., no trash talk). The results of this study suggest that in some gaming setting, there is no need for the experienced player to self-handicap, and that other factors (e.g., familiarity with other players, enjoyment and familiarity with similar games) may more strongly affect the new player's experience.

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