Meet the (Media) Producers

Danielle Herro, Clemson University
Lorraine Lin, Clemson University

Abstract: This research details the perceived influence of early gaming habits towards media production from seven students enrolled at a university in the Southeast. Participants identified as heavily involved in creating media such as anime, videos, fanfiction, webcomics, games, and digital music. Data collection and analysis included surveys, interviews, and artifacts identifying and categorizing six main themes: game play preferences, persistence, early connections between game play and media, support and feedback, creations inspired by games, and significance of games in current lives. The study found that most participants believed game play in childhood influenced increasingly complex media production habits. Six of the seven believed game play influenced their career path. The paper concludes with implications for education.

Introduction

While considerable research has been conducted on why people play and persist in games (Callega, 2010; Gee, 2007; Cole & Griffiths, 2007), the benefits of gaming to promote systems thinking, problem solving, creativity and interpersonal skills (Cayton-Hodges, 2011; Gee, 2005; Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014; Jackson et al., 2011; Shapiro, 2014), and the convergence of gaming and other forms of media production surrounding games (e.g. in affinity groups, modding games, creating artifacts for game play) [Gee & Hayes, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Squire, 2011]), less research has been done directly with those who create media inspired by *past* game play. These media producers are ever-present, yet can be hard to find since there is no central network of "creators" as sharing media varies by genre, preferred platform or method of sharing, and whim of the producer. At times the work is considered a hobby going unnoticed unless others take interest.

Gee and Hayes' (2010) narratives of four women gamers, in various stages of life, provides the most detailed explanation of gaming as a gateway to technical and interpersonal skills, design, writing, artistic expression and programming. In one account, Gee and Hayes trace the trajectory of a successful human resources developer to skills honed in a virtual world and its surrounding communities of practice. The authors discuss the capacity of games to influence enduring personal goals, which in turn impacted the women's navigation of social, cultural, and economic problems. They suggest games and digital media have significantly altered the learning landscape allowing people to pursue their own special trajectory—with tremendous, but largely ignored, consequences for education. Similarly, in a literature review of gaming in education (McClarty et al., 2012), games are described as opportunities for personalized and interest-driven learning. However, the review provides scenarios rather than empirical evidence for how this might occur.

Since media production is increasingly valued as an expression of literacy and considered an important means of preparing students in the 21st century (Peppler & Kafai, 2007; Gee, 2009), understanding the potential of game play towards media production may offer insight into (a) how to provide interest-driven approaches to learning, and (b) effective ways to enhance deeper learning experiences. This study draws on the work of Gee & Hayes (2010) and adds to the literature on productive play. It provides an in-depth look at the relationship between game play and media production from the perspective of seven young adults who trace their trajectory from youth to early adulthood. Our central question was, "Has video game playing impacted your media production?" Specifically, we sought to explore if they believed the introduction of video game play in their lives influenced their production habits or career goals.

The Study

Qualitative inquiry was used to investigate "how people interpret their worlds, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 5); in this case how students engaging in producing media interpreted whether their current production is attributed to their game-playing experiences. The study was approached through semi-structured questions and in-depth interviews (Merriam, 2009) allowing us to analyze the relationship between game play and media production, the phenomena we wished to understand and describe. Data was collected from individuals who shared this common experienced and self-identified as video-game players *and* media producers.

Participants

Seven students at a university in the Southeastern United States enrolled in a 4 different program areas (Computer Science, Education, Communications, and Engineering) were recruited for the study. Three were female, and all were chosen because they spent significant time in the University's media labs and self-identified as passionate about, and deeply involved in producing media. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 24; two were graduate students, the other five were undergraduates. Most came from middle class families with 2-parent households, one student reported their household income below $25,000, and one reported a household income above $100,000 while growing up, and all had siblings. None of the students perceived their parents as media producers; one student clarified that while her father worked at Disney for a short time he did not "animate" or create media. Six of the seven participants had parents who imposed limits on time spent playing games in childhood, with one participant stating his father really 'hated' video games. Participants' common media production habits included: digital music mixing and production, webcomics, fanfiction, fanart, instructional video creation, and designing games.

Data Collection

Data was collected via an in-depth surveys aimed at understanding participants' demographics, early experiences with game playing and media production, enjoyment of games, perspectives towards the influence of games and current media production, and beliefs about the influence of game play and media production for career or life goals. The first survey consisted of 43 questions and informed questions for follow-up interviews. A Google Hangout facilitated a full-group interview with nine additional questions formulated to extend the survey responses, probing further about game play and media production habits. The interview was recorded and transcribed. Finally, follow-up emails invited participants to clarify information, and share links or artifacts to their current work. All seven participated in both surveys and the Google Hangout, six of the seven participated in the email exchanges and provided artifacts (embedded images, video, links to websites), including written narration explaining the examples of their media production.

Following the steps of qualitative data analysis, three researchers used open coding, which were then grouped into "analytical codes" to interpret the data and highlight categories (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). This provided an initial understanding of how the participants experienced game play and media production in their lives. Next, each researcher developed categorical codes or "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, p. 61) from the data, which were used to write a description of themes tied to participants' experiences. Nvivo was used by two of the researchers to identify, sort and code themes, the third researcher read, winnowed, and sorted data into themes manually. Consensus regarding themes from clusters of meaning identified participants' perceptions of (a) game play preferences, (b) persistence, (c) early connections between game play and media production, (d) support systems and feedback, (e) media creation; and (f) significance of games in their current life.

We highlight each theme as we recreate the essence of "how and why" these individuals believe video game play influenced their media production, referring to them collectively as "Media Producers".

Game Play Preferences

Affinity for fiction

The Media Producers stated that they preferred games encompassing adventure, historical fiction, science fiction, role-playing or fantasy while growing up. Six of the 7 participants mentioned enjoying the genres of role-playing and platforming games, wanting to "put themselves in the character's shoes". The same six participants owned multiple gaming consoles, with the one participant, "Krista" (all names are pseudonyms) only owning and gaming on a PC. When asked to rate the importance of the genre to the enjoyment of games on a "scale of 1-10", again the 6 console gamers rated the genre as highly important, assigning an 8, 9 or 10, and Krista rated the genre as a "3".

Fantasy and role-playing

Asking participants to simply talk about their favorite games or series growing up, six mentioned games with deep narrative storylines such as *Final Fantasy* (Squaresoft, 1997) Blizzard games, *Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) and *Half-Life* (Sierra Studios, 1998). One mentioned enjoying MECC (1973) adventure games such as *Oregon* and *Amazon Trail*. Most of the games mentioned were in the 'high-fantasy' or 'science-fiction' genre, meaning they included magic or non-existent technology such as flying pirate ships or light sabers. When asked to specify favorite games when growing up, all of the Media Producers, without direct prompting, discussed researching a particular game's development, and the feelings and skills the games evoked. For example, Destiny suggested she was "hooked on

the Final Fantasy franchise" (Square Enix, 2015) and admired the sole composer for the series as a "self-taught musician that I look up to"; Riley enjoyed Super Smash Bros. (Nintendo, 2014), Metroid (Nintendo, 2002) and Pokémon (The Pokémon Company, 1996) franchises saying "Pokémon singlehandedly motivated me to learn how to read when I first got it for the Gameboy". LouAnn stated that *Final Fantasy 7* and *9* introduced her to "really deep story-telling and character connections". Krista suggested, a point and click adventure game, *Spy Fox in Dry Cereal* (Humongous Entertainment, 1997) had developers who understood "amusing dialogue and animations". All of the Media Producers said they enjoyed the same type of games now as they did growing up and while they branched out into newly released games they often followed the next generation of games by the same developer.

Persistence: Fun, Immersion and Completion

Five participants talked about escaping the real world, immersing themselves in fantasy, and feeling a sense of completion or accomplishment by "finishing a collection" (completing a series of games). All seven participants mentioned the importance of fun when asked why they currently gamed and suggested they would continue playing particular games if they had rich story lines, were highly interactive and had well-developed characters. The Media Producers discussed the amount of development that went producing a good game making statements such as:

> "I think the reason I like them (referring to Super Mario Brothers, Zelda, and Halo) the most was because of the amount of development that was put into making them good games. Poorly architected games were clear when you played them. The online multiplayer component and competitiveness—being able to beat people in fights or game play or character statistics—that was great, too."

They believed certain game mechanics increased their persistence and allowed them to escape be becoming totally immersed in the game. One participant noted gaming allowed her to take "a vacation to the game worlds in my living room anytime I wanted", and another said she played pretend with her sister while fully immersed in game play. Leveling up, solving puzzles and taking on increasingly difficult challenges were cited as enjoyable and not tedious.

Early Connections between Game Play and Media Production

Interestingly, the majority of Media Producers pointed to particular types of media embedded within their favorite childhood games when asked why specific games became their favorites. They mentioned the games graphics, music, well-developed worlds or artwork. To illuminate understanding, we provide transcribed data from 2 of the participants. When talking about the Metroid franchise, a series of 11 science-fiction games played on the Game Boy, Riley stated:

> Looking back on it, and replaying it within the last year, I think what kept bringing me back was the immersive and open environment that I could explore. The pixel artwork was very detailed, and the music and sound design really drew me in. Car trips to the beach and mountains would blur by and all I remember of that time are the cool, metal walls of the Biologic Space Laboratories. By the time I played *Half-Life 2* (Sierra Entertainment, 2004), I had played a lot of good and mediocre shooters. *Half-Life 2* blew my mind because, like Metroid: Fusion, it was very immersive and structured itself differently from most shooters I'd played. In many cases, I was either given a very short, paragraph length briefing on why I was either sneaking into this building or storming this village to shoot dudes, or given a more informative but immersion breaking cutscene.

James stated:

> As for Zelda, my friends liked it and I thought it was cool, though until recently I've never been very good at them- however, Zelda's world and designs helped spark a love for fantasy settings and characters, which show up prevalently in my work. *Earthbound* (Nintendo, 1994) hit home with my deep seated love of cartoons and silly games, and influenced that side of art.

Support and Feedback

Five of the seven participants talked in great detail about the social aspect of gaming playing with friends, other gamers, while exploring and conquering fantastical worlds. They expressed feelings of social support whether playing with or against "friends" making statements such as, "I enjoy being able to beat people I *like*…and totally destroying them was great, too." "I made friends over video games, and still do", "I played with a cast of exciting

and interesting characters who would talk to me and make me feel important", and "I've connected with a lot of amazing people through them, and many an hour has been spent going over experiences in games or story lines or characters."

Participation in online gaming communities was mixed among the 7 participants; three participated in gaming communities related their play such as Steam (http://steamcommunity.com/), MMO forums, and The Art of Warfare (www.taw.net). Although we asked exclusively about gaming, many referred to games as the connection to particular online communities related to media production. For example, Arnie talked about his significant participation creating music for Abelton (https://www.ableton.com/), LouAnn mentioned art communities such as DeviantArt (http://www.deviantart.com/) and Furaffinity (http://www.furaffinity.net/), and Riley discussed co-hosting a monthly online video talkshow in support of game development.

School was not considered a primary support, and in some cases not even a secondary support for media creation. Riley and James created and shared music and artwork online; Arnie was heavily involved in music programs at school, yet his network to share his compositions existed outside of school; Alex saw his best, most creative writing as unencumbered outside of school; and LouAnn felt largely misunderstood by her teachers, writing fanfiction and creating anime for her Internet fans. At the university level, few of their skills were recognized in coursework other than a few specialized classes using 3-D modeling or game design modding.

Media Production: Creations Inspired by Games

All seven of the participants believed most of their current creations were inspired by video games, often having been played years ago. Destiny said all but two or three of her songs were inspired by Final Fantasy and Super Nintendo games, in particular the game *Aero the Acrobat*, (Sunsoft, 1993); Riley drew fan art inspired by *Star-Fox* (Nintendo, 1993) and other short platforming games; Arnie, who designed graffiti art and music, believed the biggest contribution game play had was in his interpretation of what was aesthetically pleasing; Krista wrote several fan-fictions and drew hundreds of fan art characters based on various games; LouAnn suggested almost every drawing and animation she created came from video game play (she was also heavily involved in cosplay, a subculture promoting costuming and role play with particular characters); Alex said much of his fiction writing is inspired by video games. James provided a trajectory of game-play inspired media production saying:

> [Games inspired] pretty much every doodle in elementary, sketches in middle school, more complex works in high school and college. When I started on deviant art, I only did *Earthbound* drawings pretty much - 2D drawings in flash, 3D renderings in blender of pseudo n64 graphics… then I moved on to an idea of my own that I never did anything with (hey I was like, what, 13?). Then more complex 3D pictures, 2D digitals in photoshop… then I moved on to other games like ario, ario, ario, etc. On youtube, I have a channel dedicated to direct transcriptions of *Earthbound* (and other) songs. As for more original works, any character I create I automatically think "could I put this in a game sometime down the road?" when I was in elementary school, I tried to come up with a game idea, creating characters and a whole world- I was a very ambitious child. As I got older, I did a choral arrangement of the song "wisdom of the world" from the *Earthbound* series, and a transcription of the barbershop rendition of "God Only Knows" from *Bioshock Infinite*.

Significance of Games and Media in their Current Life

The Media Producers unequivocally believed video games were important in their current lives, but not simply for fun, social bonding, or challenge. Six of the seven participants stated game play was important for continuing inspiration to guide media production. They mentioned passion, the need for creative expression, occasional profit, and promoting a sense of happiness as reasons for their continued productivity. Their current media production included: working on music for an Andriod App a friend was releasing, producing an album, creating a "logo series" using Adobe Illustrator (http://www.adobe.com/products/illustrator.html), drawing comics for a writer, drawing character-expression art for Dungeons & Dragons, and transcribing the orchestra parts of Pink Floyd's, "*The Trail*". Many of them noted they were occasionally approached and paid for their current work, usually by friends or someone who had viewed their work online. Alex said, "They inspire me to write stories. My inspiration for becoming a writer came from seeing the great worlds created in video games, and I desired to recreate that in writing", and James spoke in depth about the continuing influence of games to engaging with other forms of media saying, "If it wasn't for games, I wouldn't have drawn as much or got into wanting to make music, or got into pretending so much as a kid." Many were eager to share their current productions; screenshots from two of the Media Producers are below.

Figure 1 (left to right): A comic by James; Album cover art by Riley

Aspirations: Perceived influence on their future

The Media Producers are currently making media and believe they will continue to make media in the future as either a hobby or career. Lack of time or energy, time management, the capacity to learn new programs, at times, keeps them from producing as much as they would like. Three of the seven saw game-play as integral to the career wanted in gaming industry, however three others mentioned game-play inspired careers unrelated to a gaming career. LouAnn, Riley, and Destiny hoped to work in the game design industry with three separate interests: writing narratives, mixing soundtracks, and programming games. Riley was also considering a career in writing soundtracks for television or movies. James wanted a career in animation that focused on voice-acting or 3-D modeling. Alex said he wanted a career in what he loved, and what was inspired by games—writing for digital newspaper or magazine. Krista hoped to be a voice actor on animated movies even though her degree was in Engineering with a minor in Japanese. Arnie saw media production continuing to influence his hobbies but didn't know if it would have a strong in his planned future as an administrator in higher education. Interestingly, four participants said that without the influence of video games they do not know what they would be doing on their "life track".

The Media Producers offered thoughts regarding why some produce more media than others. Most of them believed their need to be creative was something they developed at a young age, and three of them pointed to "fear" as reason why some choose not to create media. Riley said some people were afraid to write (his passion), Alex suggested it was "fear of the unknown" citing the Internet as an "open door for experimentation with digital media and an overwhelming number of resources", and Arnie commented that the competition, especially with crowd-funding was so fierce that it scared amateurs off.

Discussion

As evidenced in the themes above, the Media Producers were more likely to persist at playing games offering fantasy worlds, role-play or interaction with characters and other players through action and adventure. They believed the immersive experiences provided support, fun, "an escape," and challenge impacting persevere in which they completed long games or in some cases entire series. These findings are consistent with a large body of research suggesting game elements influence players' persistence and motivation (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Gee, 2007). Emerging from this research was evidence that most of the young gamers were drawn to types of media present within games (graphics, music, artwork) at young ages, and this exposure inspired them to produce similar types of media extending many years into the future; *all* of the Media Producers pointed to the strong influence of gameplay to their current production. Furthermore (as demonstrated in James detailed account) some of the Media Producers became interested in creating various forms of media, but then continued refining and learning more sophisticated ways to use the medium. These findings are consistent with Gee and Hayes (2010) and imply that early experiences with gameplay could shape the trajectory of media production (interests and products) and

98

in some instances influence interest in particular careers. The study points to two significant ideas, detailed in the following sections, that may impact pedagogical approaches with media in K-12 and higher education settings.

Games as Conduits to Interest-based or Personalized Learning

The inarguable value the Media Producers placed on game play to pique their interests, provide a means of socialization and support, and facilitate a means of escape is not novel finding, but instead consistent with research across fields (Callega, 2010; Gee, 2007; Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014). What is significant are findings suggesting particular games captured the Media Producers attention and then persisted with various types of media that were first appealing, and then became the focus of their work for years to come, in many cases the influence has persisted for more than a decade. The Media Producers pointed to particular games capturing their imagination, inspiring them to take on roles, write stories, draw, and create music—not necessarily tied to modding the game, creating artifacts or fanfiction around the game. Admittedly, the participants' relatively young age makes it difficult to assess if the trend will continue, but it seems likely based on their beliefs about their future creating media. This implies that educators in K-12 and higher education may draw on game play preferences, or specific game genres important to individuals as a *starting point* to personalize learning. Conceivably, understanding learners gaming interests and connecting it to thoughtful media production may entice learners to hone multiliteracies, giving them a voice (Soep, 2007) and foster a sense of well-being (Andersen & Rainie, 2012) while promoting learning.

Connecting Game Play and Media Production to Careers

Importantly, this study demonstrated that game play could influence career paths, including aspirations outside of the game design industry. Six of the seven participants discussed the strong connection between game play as a primary influence of their media production, which in turn influenced their career paths. Early experiences with game narratives, design elements, and soundtracks were identified as highly appealing by the young adults and created a desire to increase skill development and production. This often translated to honing more complex practices with 3-D modeling, computer animation, photo editing, video editing, music composition and audio platforms. Support for refining the skills occurred primarily outside of school with the exception of a few computer science courses teaching 3-D modeling skills; the primary reinforcement to continue their work occurred through online critique and feedback. This finding implies there is value in relating game play and media design experiences to assist learners in developing career goals. It also raises the question of whether middle, secondary and post-secondary educators might offer additional supports to reinforce work shared in online communities, and whether these supports might assist students in career choices. A useful tactic might include educators beginning by exploring their students' game play interests, connecting those interests to media production, and then guiding students to consider a wider range of careers. Further research is necessary to build theories around interest-driven learning with media.

References

Anderson, J., & Rainie, L. (2012). The future of gamification. *Pew Research Center's Internet &*

    American Life Project.

Callega, G. (2010). Digital games and escapism. *Games and Culture,* 5(4), 335-353.

Cole, H., & Griffiths, M.D. (2007). Social interactions in massively multiplayer online role-playing

    games. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior, 10*(4), 575-583.

Creswell, J.W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among !ve approaches (2nd

    ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American*

    Psychologist, *69*(1), 66.

Gee, J.P. (2005) Learning by design: Good video games as learning machines. *eLearning,*

    2(1), 5-16.

Gee, J. P. (2007). *Good video games + Good learning: Collected essays on video games*

learning and literacy. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Gee, J. P. (2009). Games, learning, and 21st century survival skills. *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research*, *2*(1).

Gee, J. P., & Hayes, E. R. (2010). *Women and gaming: The Sims and 21st century learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jackson, L.A., Witt, E. A. Games, A.I., Fitzgerald, H.E., von Eye, A., & Zhao, Y. (2011). Information technology use and creativity: Findings from the children and technology project. Computers in human behavior, 1-7.

Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, Al., & Weigel, M. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century.* The MacArthur Foundation: Chicago, Illinois.

Humongous Entertainment. (1997). Spy Fox in "Dry Cereal." [videogame]. City of Industry, CA: Humongous Entertainment.

McClarty, K. L., Orr, A., Frey, P. M., Dolan, R. P., Vassileva, V., & McVay, A. (2012). *A literature review of gaming in education*. Pearson Research Report.

Merriam S. (2009). *Qualitative research. A guide to design and implementation*. Josey-Bass. San Francisco, CA.

Microsoft Studios. (2014). Halo: The master chief collection. [video game]. Kirkland, Washington: 343 Industries.

Microsoft Studios. (2001). Halo franchise. Bellevue, Washington: Bungie, Inc.

Nintendo. (1994). Earthbound. [video game]. Kyoto, Japan: Ape, & HAL Laboratory.

Nintendo. (2002). Metroid fusion. [video game]. Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo R&D1.

Nintendo. (1993). Starfox. [video game]. Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo EAD.

Nintendo (2014). Super Smash Bros. Franchise. HAL Laboratories. Tokyo, Japan.

Nintendo. (1986). The legend of Zelda. [video game]. Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo R&DI.

Nintendo. (2015). The legend of Zelda franchise. Redmond, Washington: Nintendo.

Peppler, K. A., & Kafai, Y. B. (2007). From SuperGoo to Scratch: Exploring creative digital media production in informal learning. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *32*(2), 149-166.

Shapiro, J. (2014). Social and emotional benefits of video games: metacognition and relationships. *Retrieved from www.joanganzcooneycenter.org*.

Sierra Studios. (1998). Half-life. [video game]. Fresno, CA: Valve Corporation.

Sierra Entertainment. (2004). Half-life 2. [video game]. Bellevue, WA: Valve Corporation.

Square Enix. (2015). Final fantasy franchise. El Segundo, CA: Square Enix.

Squaresoft. (1997). Final fantasy VII. [video game]. El Segundo, CA: Square

   Enix.

Soep, E. (2007). Beyond literacy and voice in youth media production (Au-delà de la

   littératie et de la voix dans la production média des jeunes). *McGill Journal of Education/Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, *41*(3).

Squire, K. (2011). *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in

   the Digital Age. Technology, Education--Connections (the TEC Series)*. Teachers College Press. 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027.

Sunsoft. (1993). Aero the acro-bat. [video game]. Kōnan, Aichi, Japan: Iguana Entertainment.

The Pokémon Company. (1996). Pokémon. [video game]. Tokyo, Japan: Game Freak, Inc.