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## Taxonomy and Flow

### Engaging Virtual Classrooms Using Player Archetypes

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#### Abstract

Digital games are an ideal form of media which presents engaging content, in that they can create enriching applications of taught information beyond the confines of the classroom. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) engage players on multiple levels by allowing players to explore worlds, reach achievements, overcome challenges, interact with other players, and create unique micro cultures. These explicitly designed cultures have the capacity to be more than an educational experience for one student, they give multiple students the ability to interact, learn and apply what they've learned together at a global level (Squire, 2012). As a former AAA and mobile game designer, I will review the core concepts of MMO design as they relate to the psychological state of flow and overlay the Bartle taxonomy of player types to illustrate how each aspect can work together to create an optimal experience for play and learning.

#### Overview

Based on my experience as a professional game designer, educational games are traditionally designed to engage a single player and to extend the classroom learning cycle away from the school house. This focus on the individual student is eliminating the engaging potential of a multiplayer game or virtual classroom where play and education are brought together. Games like *Quest Atlantis* (Barab, 2000) integrate massively multiplayer game design principles, but tend to be outliers in larger educational applications.

These qualities overlap with the psychological concept of flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 2008). Engaging content that generates flow, as it relates to digital games, consist of the following four qualities (Baron, 2012):

1. Explicitly delineated goals with easy to follow rules.
2. Attainable goals within the rules.
3. Clear, usable and relevant feedback.
4. Minimal player distraction.

Virtual worlds have an additional layer of consideration, illustrating four categories of behavior by

participants. These archetypes (Bartle, 2004) generalize ways in which participants play within virtual worlds or MMOs.

## Explorers, Goals and Rules

For a player to enter into a state of flow, the rules of play and the goals they generate must be concrete, achievable and rewarding (Schell, 2015). Clear goals and rules aid in establishing methods of control of the players (Riegle, 2006) and educators alike within a digital game and MMO. Virtual communities, however, require educators to cede some control of the place space. Explorers establish the boundaries of the game, and communicate these goals and rules to the Socializers.

Certainly, this desire to explore can be illustrated explicitly in the popularity of games like *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011). *Minecraft* is deceptively weak when it comes to embracing the player types beyond explorers and requires the player to be far more self-directed than other games. That isn't necessarily a weakness, nor does it undermine the use of *Minecraft* as an educational tool (Mojang, 2016) (University of Texas at Dallas, 2015).

## Achievers and Attainable Goals

When playing digital games, if the player cannot attain the goals presented by the challenges of the game, then the player will not continue playing the game. The goal that the player is striving toward is centrally tied to the idea that the participants are critical to progress through the game, where what they know is directly related to what they can do and ultimately what they can become (Barab S. P., 2012). Achievers use the goals established by the game designers as proof of capability and skill within the game, and determine by action if the goals are attainable through play.

In educational games, the presentation of goals for achievers is hit or miss. *The Radix Endeavor* (Filament Games, 2014) provides an experience that is similar to *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Where the game fails to embrace the concept of achievement is providing players goals to achieve beyond the initial quest line in the game. Because *Radix* has eschewed the concept of character classes found in other MMOs, every character has the same achievement goals and capabilities, giving little variation or depth of play.

## Socializers and Feedback

Socializers are “people for whom the greatest reward is interacting with other people, through the medium of the virtual world” (Bartle, 2004). These people craft and maintain the affinity groups and affinity spaces within which learning takes place. The idea of collective intelligence is that “knowledge is distributed among collectives rather than in individual heads” (Squire, 2012). The socializer is then the organizer and creator of the “intelligent things” that the collectives create by applying their brainpower to problems (Squire, 2012).

Without appropriate feedback, players lose this sense of agency and slip out of flow. This can be mediated by an instructor providing timely information or quick access to external information sources,

there is the chance that a player's game is doomed from the start, requiring a complete restart. Feedback by the game, therefore, is a source of information that the socializers relay to the rest of the game community. When feedback breaks down, any game is frustrating (EduWeb, 2015) with little value as an educational experience, virtual or otherwise.

## Killers and Minimizing Distraction

Killers are not necessarily the most educationally relevant archetype on first blush. The term "Dominator" is replacing "Killer" in the lexicon (Bartle, 2004), as these players spend their energies controlling or dominating the play of others. Even then, the notion of developing a game in which one of the designed interactions is players imposing their will on others would be met with concern.

Games should minimize distractions and emphasize players entering a state of flow. In terms of game design, that is a focus on removing mechanics or systems that distracts players from the core experience of the game and ensures that the player is balanced between challenge and boredom (Schell, 2015). Affecting other players keeps the Dominator in flow. Dominators, by affecting others, refocus other players back into flow.

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