



Exploring persistence in gaming: The role of self-determination and social identity



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ABSTRACT

The question of why players of video games persist gaming in the face of what seems to be insufficient reward has not yet been properly answered. This paper approaches the issue by combining two general psychological theories: Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A large scale survey ($N = 7252$) enabled a comparison of three groups which differed in terms of their Gamer Identity Strength (GIS), namely the degree to which players define gaming as part of their social identity. GIS is highest in Hardcore gamers and lower for Heavy and Casual gamers. GIS was positively, and uniformly, related with needs for Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness. Meanwhile, regulation was greater and more internal in the higher GIS groups. Finally, persistence was found to increase with GIS. The structure of needs and regulation modes underlying persistence was comparatively analyzed for the three groups; similarities between GIS groups were more frequent than differences. Most importantly, results indicated that Casual and Heavy gamers were motivated to continue to play as a result of both the feelings of enjoyment and a sense of connectedness. Hardcore gamers were more intrinsically motivated through enjoyment enhancing their levels of persistence accordingly.

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1. Introduction

Games can make a better world. McGonigal (2011) describes how experienced gamers are extremely self-motivated and always seem to have a reasonable expectation of success when playing an online game. What's more, after playing, social bonds tend to strengthen and gamers are happy to work hard to achieve meaningful goals, such as an *epic win*, namely a typical situation encountered by experienced gamers where they complete a certain task which was initially perceived to be all but impossible.

Outsiders are often struck by the amount of energy that these aficionados put into playing video and computer games. Frequently, players spend many hours on a particular game level. Finding the solution may require a multitude of attempts, and observers taking the perspective of the player are struck by the latter's seeming resistance to frustration and their subsequent persistence in play. To the outsider, the persistent player's efforts look more like labor than gaming. So, how can the aficionado's persistence be understood? Part of the answer can be found in

the fact that games offer intermediate rewards on the road to the ultimate goal (Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Gee, 2007; Loftus & Loftus, 1983), since they are comprised of levels that players have to achieve serially to get there. However, when these intermediate rewards are not achieved after repeated efforts, players must inevitably feel frustrated.

For some, this will result in them exiting the game altogether, while for others this is an incentive to try again. What accounts for the difference? In this paper, we propose an explanation of persistence in gaming which is theoretically embedded in two general psychological perspectives. Firstly, Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provided an account of the underlying, motivational deep-structure of persistence in a task. Secondly, we used Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory to account for differences between groups of gamers, i.e. those who identify with being a gamer and those who do so to a lesser extent, as gaming is a salient element of self-perceived identity. This gamer identity was conceptualized by introducing the variable Gamer Identity Strength (GIS) which enabled comparison regarding motivational structures and persistence between different gamer groups.

Our research was guided by two general research questions. The first focused on how different levels of GIS are related to the

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proposed motivational structure, while the second was aimed at unraveling whether differences between the gamer identity groups in levels of persistence when gaming can be explained by differences in their motivational structures.

2. Literature review

2.1. Explaining persistence when playing video games

The popularity of video and computer games among an expanding demographic raises the question of why so many people devote substantial amounts of time, energy and, often, money to this pastime. The issue is particularly pressing when we compare games to other forms of media. Unlike entertainment media such as television and film, experiencing the actual content of a game requires a continuous flow of active input from the player. In other words, when a player stops pushing the appropriate buttons, the unfolding of the game simply ends (Tan & Jansz, 2008). The player's investment of effort is thus understood in this paper as a form of motivated action.

The theoretical framework of most of the previous studies into motivations for gaming was drawn from the *Uses and Gratifications* approach in communication research. This theory focuses on the selection of games, or particular game genres, from a variety of entertainment sources, including television and film (Rubin, 2002; Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006). Its fundamental assumption about the agency of media users is particularly applicable to consumers of interactive media, including games (Ruggiero, 2000). The approach is based on the notion that people purposively select games in their media diet to satisfy certain needs (Sherry et al., 2006). Indeed, empirical research has shown that particular games or genres have been chosen to satisfy such needs as diversion, fantasy, arousal, challenge, immersion, competition and social interaction (Jansz & Tanis, 2007; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Sherry et al., 2006; Yee, 2006).

The emerging catalogue of motivations partly coincided with the results from media-psychological research on motivations for gaming. In psychological models of entertainment, it has recently been proposed that the most general motivation for gaming probably is simply enjoyment. From this perspective, gamers play games for their own sake, that is, for the pleasures engendered by playing (Boyle, Connolly, Hailey, & Boyle, 2012; Tan, 2008; Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2003; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Yee, 2006). Following this premise, it is thus possible to assume that having fun when playing video games is closely related to persistence in play. However, it has been convincingly argued by Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, and Organ (2010) that enjoyment has so far been defined in a vague and circular way, and that as such it is a much better option to regard enjoyment as the outcome of need satisfaction. If this is so, persistence in gaming should be explained by satisfaction of needs rather than by the mere experience of pleasure, that is by underlying motivations.

Research starting from the premise that persistence in gaming is related to motivations within the academic field of gaming is still rare. This is in part because significant effort in psychological research into gaming is devoted to investigating the effects of playing violent games on levels of aggression and other socially undesirable forms of behavior, feelings and thoughts (Anderson et al., 2010). As a rule, these effect studies do not address player motivations directly. If they do, they tend to only deal with aggressive motivations and thus offer a somewhat limited contribution to more general accounts of motivation and persistence in gaming. The studies referred to are particularly criticized for ignoring the social motivations for (and the effects of) gaming (e.g. Williams,

2006), which have been argued and demonstrated to be separate and key incentives for playing violent games (Griffiths, Davies, & Chapell, 2004; Jansz, 2005; Yee, 2007). Overall, the emerging tradition of research on motivations for gaming lacks the integration of findings into an encompassing and coherent, theoretical framework. This state of affairs has inspired us to adopt a broader motivational perspective on gaming, using Self-determination Theory as a general theory of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Another striking limitation of the available psychological studies of the motivations for gaming is that they have failed to incorporate the perspective of devoted gamers into their framework. Indeed, it can be argued that the outsider's curiosity about the aficionado's tenacity needs to be complemented by an insider's perspective to account for the doggedness that is encountered.

The present study sought to specify what it means to be a gaming "aficionado", and proposes that this relates to a particular gamer identity, namely that of the "Hardcore gamer." We also attempted to identify specific, and possibly unique, motivational features related to this type of aficionado player in comparison to those with "weaker" gamer identities. In adopting this approach, the motivational issue in this paper goes beyond the question of game selection as stipulated by the Uses and Gratification perspective, and beyond the idea that persistence is related to enjoyment in a simple and straightforward manner.

2.2. Persistence and Self-determination Theory

Playing games has much in common with other goal-directed leisure activities. The example of sports illustrates this well. Like gamers, sportspeople must train to perform and learn how to persist in the face of disappointing results (Joesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001). In addition to leisure, persistence has been studied in a variety of positive and negative contexts, for example, developing a career or dropping out of school (Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). In most studies, persistence is conceptualized as a personality trait concerned with mastery, self-control and focused attention, in particular when individuals are confronted with distractions (Andersson & Bergman, 2011; Shiner, 1998). In the explanatory models used, individual differences in persistence were assumed to contribute to, if not cause, individual differences in task performance.

The present study takes a different perspective. Instead of conceptualizing persistence as a possible causal agent of playing games, we see persistence as an outcome of other motivational determinants. In our study, persistence refers to a manifest, behavioral pattern that is concerned with persisting to play video games, despite setbacks, frustration of goals and insufficient reward. It is similar to what Cech et al. called "behavioral persistence" (2011, p. 644) as it is the actual execution of an activity, which sets it apart from "intentional persistence" (ibid.) which is concerned with planning an activity.

To conceptualize the possible motivational determinants of persistence in play we used Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), or SDT. SDT is a widely researched theory of motivation that is applicable to activities in the major spheres of life, such as work, love and play (Thaggard, 2010). It holds that human behavior is determined by three basic psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to the desire to self-organize experiences and behavior and act in accordance with one's own sense of self. Competence, meanwhile, is the need for challenge and to experience one's own effectiveness. Finally, Relatedness refers to the need to experience community and be connected to other individuals and collectives in some form or another. The individual's self-determined motivations are the result of the satisfaction of these needs in a particular social context.

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