The Achievement Machine: Understanding the Xbox Live Metagame.

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ABSTRACT

Xbox Live Achievements and Gamerscores have become an important part of Xbox 360 gaming and have played an important role in the success of the console. Based on the framework provided by Microsoft, the community has created a rich and intriguing meta-game where the individual games become pieces of a larger whole.

For every game released on the system, the developer has to define a number of achievements and attribute a number of gamerscore poits for each achievement. The total number of gamerscore points for each game has to be a thousand, but the number of achievements can be anything up to fifty and what the gamer is rewarded for is completely up to the developer. Players can look up other players to see which games they have been playing, how many achievements they have gained and their total gamerscore (see fig. 1).
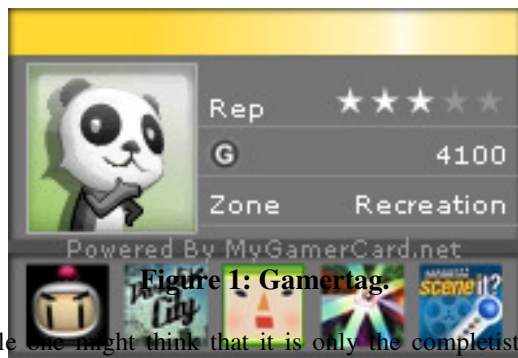

Figure 1: Gamertag.

While one might think that it is only the completists that hunt achievements, this is not the case. It has changed how gamers in general play their games and which games they play. A study by EEDAR (Electronic Entertainment Design and Research) [1] even suggests that many and diverse achievements lead to higher review scores and more units sold. As a result, the way developers have chosen to integrate achievements into their games has received a considerable amount of attention, with websites focusing on discussing, comparing and even reviewing achievements.

In some cases, achievements have played a significant role in the popularity of a title, like the Pacifism achievement in Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved which was expanded into a separate game mode in the sequel. Achievements can also work as important status markers for the gamers, like the Mile High Club achievement from Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare or Little Rocket Man from Half Life 2.

At the same time, many gamers believe that achievements have had a detrimental effect on gaming by operationalizing play and making it more instrumental. One indication of the intensity of the debate over achievements and the surrounding practices is that a search for the term "achievement whore" returns over half a million hits.

Sometimes the achievements create obstacles to the gaming experience. Examples range from the fairly obvious mistake of including an achievement for killing a team mate in multiplayer in Turok (which was changed in a patch) to the more subtle case of Mass Effect where some players held off playing the game until the achievement walkthroughs emerged, in order to minimize the number of playthroughs needed to collect all the achievements in the game.

This paper is based on a year-long study of Xbox Live gamers. The empirical materials are made up of blogs, news sites, forums, podcasts, YouTube clips, participatory observations during Xbox Live gaming sessions, articles and reviews from enthusiast and mainstream press as well as face-to-face interviews.

The theoretical foundation for the investigation is a mix of gamestudies, internet studies, sociology of technology and critical media studies.

The themes that I will discuss in the paper are socially and culturally embedded gaming practices, value negotiations, status/sign equipment, surveillance, productive play/console grinding and cheating/creative appropriation (see fig 2).

Figure 2: The machine automatizes the process of getting some of the achievements in Perfet Dark Zero.

The paper will also address the history of achievements, including Activision's patches for their Atari 2600 games where gamers could document certain in-game achievements by taking pictures of their TV-screens and send the photos to Atari whereupon they would receive a fabric patch (see fig. 3).
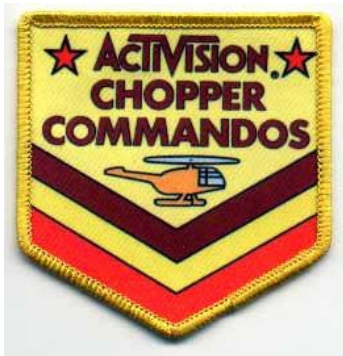

Figure 3: Activision patch awarded for a 10,000 points high score in Chopper Command .

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