

Changing Roles in Gaming: Twitch and new gaming audiences

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INTRODUCTION

Participation and interactivity are two main concepts that characterize the qualities of the medium videogames (Bogost, 2007). However, with the introduction of online broadcasting platforms such as twitch.tv, the medium now allows for different types of audience positions. Being involved with a videogame no longer requires fully (inter)active engagement. In the current study, we investigate characteristics that define this relatively new type of engagement with videogames, based on interviews conducted with viewers. What motivates people to watch games instead of playing them? How can participation and interaction be defined within this new audience position?

BACKGROUND

Watching others play videogames is, of course, not an entirely new concept. In the videogame arcades, the starting point of videogame culture, playing a game could indeed be quite a public affair. With classic racing games such as Daytona USA it was not uncommon for a group of more than twenty people to gather and cheer while two players raced each other. With consoles, however, videogame culture moved from arcades to attics and bedrooms, to re-appear later in the living room. For a long time, audiences remained fairly private. Nowadays, gaming has again become a public affair, and watching others play games is a new form of media. Scenes from GTA5 can be watched on YouTube, and international gaming championships attract huge audiences. The performances of video game commentators such as PewDiePie are a relatively recent phenomenon. His videos are considered a form of entertainment in itself, attracting not only hardcore gamers, but also unexpectedly large numbers of teenage girls, making it part of a new type of digital girl-culture.

Audience participation

Passive consumption of gaming content has been popular for some time in the form of “Let’s Play” videos, such as PewDiePie’s, predominantly on YouTube. We focus on Twitch as its live streaming system and in particular the API-access to chat messages allows design experimentation on a spectrum from ‘lean forward’ to ‘lean back’ positions for a large audience. The “Twitch Plays ...” category embodies the extreme end of that spectrum, turning the input for a game into a vote (Ramirez et al. 2014). Games designed to be played by single players are turned into a social experience by letting a large amount of people cooperate (or compete) in providing the game input. Twitch enables designs that allow for a range of participation intensities, catering to different

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personalities and motivations of the audience, enabling roles from directing and puppeteering, to coaching, heckling and cheerleading (Downs et al. 2015).

GAME DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

In newer games, the user interface often already offers room for a talking head of the gamer so they can record their performance and share it with others. An important element is the possibility of adding comments that seem to add a new layer of meaning to the videogame experience. While watching a gamer perform a game on Twitch TV, the spectators can actively engage in adding live comments themselves as well.

The addition of direct influence on the game by the audience via chat, either through ad-hoc voting requested by the streamer or through a programmatically enabled control of aspects of the game, provides a new aspect to the design of games. Examples of recent experiments are “Choice Chamber” (<http://www.choicechamber.com/>) that employs the spectators to make decisions that are usually part of game AI or level design/generation, and City Stream (<http://www.onemrbean.com/games/citystream/>) that experiments with multi-player gameplay. Partly the chat-interface draws from the long tradition of MUDs (multi-user dungeons). However, the use of voting for replacing or supplementing decisions of AI and procedural generation components opens up a design space that fits well with the diverse motivations of the new gaming audiences that frequent Twitch. At the same time, from the point of view of game design, this approach allows a new approach to Game AI that leverages human intelligence where AI is not delivering the intended variety and context-awareness.

FURTHER STEPS

Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with people who are involved on a regular basis with live game streaming. The participants were scouted using the following sources: personal contacts of the student-interviewer; known broadcasters; selected active viewers from various channels; selected Twitch.tv community members; members of external Twitch.tv community page on Reddit and the Game Studies Open Forum. All interviews were transcribed and will be analyzed to obtain a detailed qualitative description of the respondents’ use of and opinions on Twitch TV.

A first exploratory analysis of the interview data reveals a multitude of possible reasons that people have to passively watch a videogame stream, instead of actively playing the game. Education (learning to become a better player), entertainment (enjoying the caster’s performance) or social (interacting with other viewers) seem to be important aspects. In the next phase of our project, we will focus on how participation and interaction can be redefined from the perspective of this new audience position.

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