BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

GAME DESIGN

CBASS

Has Gaming Become a Chore: A qualitative content analysis of online forum discussions

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

With the constant development and iterations of video game design principles, there is a chance that their subsequent flaws are overlooked. Game designers need examples of design considerations that go beyond the typical mechanics found in popular genres and video game titles. There is the need to identify stagnant mechanics found in video games and evolve them to create a deeper engagement with players.

Previous literature has been unable to focus on how to improve mechanics, only noting the existence of their relation to real world experiences such as chores and work. The scope of this research project explores the extent to which the act of gaming can become a chore. The study defines a chore as a tedious routine task, which carries a negative connotation. However, the results suggest that certain players find chores to be a desirable feature in games. To identify mechanics and genres that players find laborious, a content analysis was conducted of online forums targeted towards video game demographics. From the results of the analysis, I shall offer recommendations from a designer's perspective on how to improve the most noteworthy mechanics for future design considerations. The significance of the study is to develop and advance design principles that have become staples of certain video game titles and genres. The study did not include a detailed explanation and expansion of certain mechanics, with examples from specific games, due to the limited amount of time and resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted primarily focused on three distinct areas of game design; mechanics, genre and the player types found in digital video games. Through examining the literature used, four common themes had arisen, categorised under the headings: mechanics, players, cheating and genre. Each heading contains subcategories that further differentiate specific trends of discussion.

Mechanics – Reward Systems

The literature on offer focused either on classifications of reward systems or more specifically on the 'meta-game' rewards found outside of the core player experience. Gazzard (2011) explores pre-existing categories of reward literature put forward by Björk and Holopainen (2005) and Hallford and Hallford (2001), to examine the temporal and spatial reward structure within a range of video games. Consequently, Gazzard creates comparisons between reward systems, specifically with 'False Rewards' and 'Illusionary Rewards'. Through the introduction of 'Illusionary Rewards', designers have been able to induce a false sense of achievement for players with no considerable gameplay benefit. However, this should not be confused with 'False Rewards' which "helps players to learn the rules of the games and gain high score opportunities" (Gazzard, 2011). Similarly, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) focused on games as the 'Play of Pleasure', with examples of multiple rewards being an operant conditioning tactic to keep players engrossed in a game. Moreover, 'Rewards of Glory' was discussed as an objective for the player to complete, which has "absolutely no impact on the gameplay itself

but will be things they end up taking away from the experience" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p.342).

Conversely, Wang and Sun (2011) stated that rewards within modern games also provide a social implication for players through the motivation of an enhanced social status. Item granting systems, used widely in Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), are used as a motivator for players, to, "encourage player exploration of game worlds, and are thought to maintain player interest during lull times" (Hao & Chuen-Tsai, 2011, p.4). In contrast, 'Meta-Game Rewards' (such as 'Achievements') are defined as goals in reward systems, "whose fulfilment is defined through activities and events in other systems" (Juho & Veikko, 2011, p.4). At their core, 'Achievements' are additional fabricated reward systems to keep players engaged within the game. However, what had arisen from the literature was the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic reward motivators. Reward systems fall under the extrinsic motivation, as players "feel pushed" (Cruz, Hanus & Fox, 2015, p.2) to play a game through the reinforcement of rewards; compared to intrinsic motivations, which boil down to the user playing for their own set goals. In fact, studies highlighted those extrinsic reward systems ('Achievements') harmed players' intrinsic motivations, thus reducing player retention time (Cruz, Hanus and Fox 2015). Clarifying a variety of rewards systems is significant as it highlights the difference between pivotal (False Rewards, Intrinsic Motivations) and lengthening (Rewards of Glory, Extrinsic Motivations) gameplay.

Mechanics – Play as Work

The sub-category, 'Play as Work' highlights literature that discusses the positive and negative outcomes and connotations between automation and repetition of gameplay. In Rettberg's (2008) discussion of corporate ideology in *World of Warcraft* (2004), repetitive gameplay is indicative of a player's capitalist mind-set. Work is recognised as morally good, due to the materialistic gain associated with it. However, when play is seen as entertainment, it is perceived as a waste of time. Likewise, McGonigal (2011) denotes the existence of 'satisfying work'. The term 'satisfying work' is defined as starting with two objectives: "a clear goal and actionable next steps toward achieving that goal" (McGonigal, 2011, p.55). Certain player demographics embrace 'satisfying work', as they immediately appreciate the results of their labour, creating a greater sense of self-worth. Furthermore, the nature of video games has distorted the boundaries between reality and play. Yee (2006c) connotes that "video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers" (Yee, 2006c, p.70). The player is satisfied to perform work practices within a game due to the reward mechanisms that immediately condition the player to work better. In addition, Gordal (2003) compares games and reality due to the similarities of repetition; the activities within both follow the sequence of "unfamiliarity and challenge, then mastery, and finally automation" (Grodal, 2003, p.148).

On the other hand, automation of play can be problematic, due to the outcomes of treating play as work. Anderson (2009) examines the issues of why people quit Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), and their detrimental experiences associated with them. Common issues such as a lack of clearly defined goals, time demands, societal pressures and the

complex designs of the game worlds all had arisen due to play becoming work. Due to the rise of E-sports, there is further evidence reinforcing the problems of treating play as work. There are problematic psychological and sociological effects placed on players, “play is no longer an escape from work […] professional gaming shapes human cognition towards more instrumental ways of being” (Brock, 2017, p.25). Due to the extrinsic reward for E-sports players having monetary value, the balance between play and work is further blurred.

Furthermore, repetitive tasks within video games enable a routine pattern of work for players. Lindley (2005) discusses the creation of ‘game-play gestalts’, for instance, in an RPG, players “send fast character to lure enemy from group, all characters kill enemy, take health, repeat” (Lindley, 2005). The repetitiveness of gameplay results in the creation of a gestalt in order to complete a task, which emphasises games becoming routine automated work. Overall, literature debating ‘Play as Work’, whether positive or negative, will be critical when discussing player habits and design considerations.

Players – Player Types

‘Player Types’ is a broad field of study that encompasses multiple categorisations, including player actions, player emotions and gamer mentalities. One of the earliest scholarly works on player types began with Bartle (1996) and his four approaches to playing Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). He identified and described four types of players, including Achievers, Explorers, Socialisers and Killers. Bartle’s multiple categorisations focus on the player’s actions during gameplay. For instance, achievers regard “points-gathering and rising in levels

as their main goal, and all is ultimately subserviant to this" (Bartle, 1996). Similarly, player types were created through analysing *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (2008) behaviour data (Drachen, Canossa & Yannakakis, 2009). The player types presented, including Veteran, Solvers, Pacifists and Runners, showed players' actions utilising the affordance of space and flexibility offered by the game's design.

In contrast, Lazzaro (2004) focused on the roles of emotion in games and its mechanics. Throughout a variety of gameplay scenarios, the emotions conveyed by players created four distinct player types, or what Lazzaro denotes as 'Keys': The Player (stimulation of their senses), Hard Fun (overcoming obstacles), Easy Fun (immersed in the game), and Other Players (social experience). Likewise, in a 3 year study, three distinct gaming mentalities were defined, which included Social, Casual and Committed mentalities (Kallio, Mayra & Kaipainen, 2010). The study suggested that players could possess multiple mentalities, but depended on "the game you play, who you play with, how much time you have to play, and how often you can play" (Kallio, Mayra and Kaipainen, 2010, p.332). The discussed player types are essential for developers in their early design phases, as to decide whether to implement certain features for their target demographic. The aforementioned literature will offer an insight into which recommendations appeal to certain player types.

Players – Player Motivations

In contrast to 'Player Types', literature focused on 'Player Motivations' were divided between online motivations of play and modelling player motivations. Yee's (2002, 2006a, 2006b)

literature was dedicated to the creation of an empirical model of player motivations in a multiplayer setting. The results of these studies enabled the creation of a five-factor model of user motivations: Relationship, Immersion, Grief, Achievement and Leadership. Similar motivations appear in a variety of other literature, which focus on online players' motivation. Through a factor analysis for dimensionality reduction, Tseng (2011) discovered two underlying motivation factors in players: a need for exploration and a need for aggression. These two preferences affect not just the elements within the game, but also external factors such as a player's financial investment and genre fondness. Furthermore, studies on MMOGs found similar results, with social interaction and competition scored as the highest motives (Kahn *et al*., 2015; Schultheiss, 2007). Motivational factors such as escapism, narrative, intellectual stimulation and challenge were also key motivators for online play.

Equally, motivational studies that focused on the creation of taxonomies discovered that challenge and social aspects of games are what engage players the most. In Kings, Delfabbros and Griffith's studies (2009, 2010), the creation of a taxonomy of video game features (social, manipulation and control, narrative and identity, reward and punishment, presentation) highlights 'rewards and punishment' as the most enjoyable and important aspects of playing games. These included features such as "levelling up, earning meta-game rewards (e.g., "Achievements"), and fast loading times" (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010, p.329). Moreover, results from a thematic analysis of Gamers' responses for a multidisciplinary study revealed similar themes as factors for gameplay: collaborative and competitive, escapism, gameplay and fun (Herodotou, Winters & Kambouri, 2015). Additionally, in a combined analysis of three studies identifying the different motivations in online and offline players,

'Challenge' was also ranked the top motivator (Hainey *et al*., 2011). As with player types, player motivations are vital in the design process for developers. From all the studies, it is evident that the social and competitive elements within games are the key motivators for players. The knowledge gathered through the aforesaid literature will enable a grounded design discussion in the most mentioned mechanics and motivators from the analysis.

Cheating – Mechanics

Literature around the topic of cheating primarily focuses on either the notion of automatic play or the several different classifications of cheating. The definition of cheating is a debated term but generally refers to "a user action that given an advantage over his/her opponents that is considered unfair by the game developer" (Webb & Soh, 2008, p.35). There are a variety of cheats that can be adopted by players, with the most popular cheats being bots, walkthroughs, speed levelling, griefing, Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDOS) and hacking (Parker, 2007). The creation of taxonomies for cheats has enabled specific classifications. Kucklich (2004) borrows concepts from other fields of study in order to construct three different types of cheats: cheats that speed up narrative progression, cheats that increase the player's frequency of interaction and cheats that enhance the range of player options. Yet, what is common in the literature is that cheats occur due "to poor or non-existent security designs" (Yan & Randell, 2005, p.2). Fundamentally, the literature suggests that cheats exist due to the developers not taking into account emergent play. Therefore, players have adopted cheats to automate aspects of gameplay, as discussed in the following literature. The definition of 'Automatic Play' refers "to the use of game bots, macros and other software that allow a total or partial automation of gameplay and in particular avatar levelling" (De Paoli,

2013). It is argued that using automatic levelling within games decreases player skill. However, this deskilling is due to the labour intensive work that most MMORPGs adopt as part of their mechanics.

In addition, the use of bots changes the perception of how a game can be played (De Paoli, 2012). The literature defines 'Bots' as "computer AI to completely control the player's avatar to automate repetitive tasks, progressing the player's avatar through the game" (Webb & Soh, 2008, p.38). Due to the limited time constraints of a normal day, bots present an efficient method of levelling in these virtual worlds. Nevertheless, there are still ethical concerns of players cheating within games. MacBride (2007) explores the role of ethics in cheating and how online gaming has reformed that concept. Certain aspects of cheating were frowned upon by players, with instances of "Corpse Camping, Gold farming through eBay, the creation of bots to be used specifically for gold farming" (MacBride, 2007, p.800); yet respondents openly admitted to the use of other methods of cheating such as walkthroughs, FAQs, cheat codes, levelling guides and bugs. Literature based on the discussion around cheats and automatic play is critical in understanding the existing methods players use to shorten or negate the process of repetitive tasks. The classifications of cheat's explored aid in the recommendations made for improving the identified mechanics through the content analysis.

Cheating – Players

The foundations of certain player archetypes are the use of cheats to disrupt others players' gameplay experiences. The most common reasons discussed amongst scholarly works is

either the progress in a game or gaining an advantage over other players (Doherty *et al*,. 2014). Similar studies detail that cheating is a method to keep playing through "boredom, difficulty, limited scenarios, rough patches or just bad games" (Consalvo, 2007, p.95). In an analogous case, a study was conducted to see if players are able to identify a cheater within a game. The results showed that players felt more engaged against the cheater than when they played the game normally (De Simone *et al*,. 2012). However, cheats are not just an indication of player engagement; companies are able to gauge players' investment within their game (Fields & Kafai, 2007). Cheats are not merely an extension of games that go purely beyond advantageous motives, rather, they are "coordinated efforts to get around security systems in order to cuss indicates a social and creative value in cheats" (Fields and Kafai, 2007, p.200). The literature mentioned previously gives examples of why players use specific cheats for a variety of reasons. As with player types previously discussed, the literature will highlight the advantages of improving 'chore-like' mechanics for cheaters.

Genre

Finally, genre is a debated discipline in the field of Game Studies. Arsenault (2009) examines the idea of genre, its evolution and the innovation of video game genre, resulting in an ambiguous concept. Genre varies across different media disciplines and is said to be "impervious to rigorous classification and systematization" (Arsenault, 2009, p.159). This is mirrored by Apperley (2006) that exemplifies there is an inability of current genre descriptions to highlight definitive genre boundaries. Nonetheless, academics have examined the creation of video game genre classification as well as the detailed specifics of a staple genre.

Wolf (2001) produced a detailed list of genres based on video game interactivity. However, this has been argued by multiple academics to be flawed, as it does not take into account modern hybrid genres (Clearwater, 2011; Whalen, 2004). In addition, scholars have concentrated on creating new methods to classify games. Through facet analysis, a new framework to organise genre consists of 12 facets and 358 foci for describing and representing video game genre (Lee *et al*., 2014). Moreover, an open-ended game classification model conceptualised a new way to catalogue a game genre, with eight meta-categories, including: virtual space, physical space, internal time, external time, player composition, player relation, struggle and game state (Elverdam & Aarseth, 2007). Through a historical modelling analysis, a series of dominant genres were identified consisting of: sport-racing, strategy and action (Faisal & Peltoniemi, 2015). Additionally, the article analysis discusses the saturation of genre in the current climate of video games, "as technological and market uncertainties have been resolved, genre innovation has declined" (Faisal and Peltoniemi, 2015, p.16).

However, not all literature focused on re-defining the term of genre; others identified the distinct features of widely recognised genres. Hitchens and Drachen (2008) examined a range of role-playing games, with common features emerging to define what an RPG is or is not. They reach the definition that an RPG must include: game world, participants, characters, game master, and interaction and narrative. Moreover, Manninen and Kujanpaa (2007) focused on the specifics of characters within MMOGs as a genre-defining feature. Value structures of a player avatar are indicative of an MMOG, as the player must complete, "quests

or missions, slay beasts, craft artefacts, or harvest mineral" in order to level up (Manninen & Kujanpaa, 2007, p.26). Overall, genre is a vague field of studies as there is no adoption of a universal classification system. Although the collected works have their differences, there are resemblances in what constituted certain genre elements. Thus, during the analysis process, it is imperative to identify mechanical genre similarities in order to recommend the best improvements.

METHODS

Data Collection

The primary data source for the content analysis was collected from online forum discussions around the topic of games becoming a chore (specifically, forums dedicated to the subject of video games). Each forum was scanned with the Google search engine, using multiple search parameters associated with the research question. Limiting my search parameter was crucial, thus only the first 15 pages found were screened. The search terms were variations based on keywords from the research question and literature, there were, as listed: *Gaming, Video Games, Chore, Work, Grind, Achievements,* and *Cheat*. After the input of seven search terms, no additional threads were used or found. As a result, a total of 64 forum threads containing 3036 messages were found. The forum threads had focused solely on either the discussion of a single game (23 posts and 811 messages) or a broad genre discussion of video games (42 posts and 2244 messages). All of the forum threads content was saved in a PDF format for future reference. In addition, due to ethical concerns, the forum users were kept anonymous, and forum handles were not recorded during the gathering or analysis process.

Table 1: Top 10 cited websites

Forum	**Threads (Total = 35)**	**Messages (Total = 1839**
Gamespot	10	508
IGN	6	393
GameFAQs	6	120
Giant Bomb	3	107
NeoGAF	2	356
Reddit /r/gaming	2	49
Steam	2	46
PlayStation Trophies	2	23
War Thunder	1	124
EuroGamer	1	113

Development of coding scheme

I have employed the method of directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to highlight the diverse explanations players gave as to why gaming is a chore. The development of a coding scheme was based on the aforementioned literature review and categorised into four sectors: *Reward, Play as Work, Motivations of Play and Cheats.* Under each category, a series of popular keywords were listed from amongst the literature. Firstly, the 'Reward' category consisted of the following keywords: *Reward, Incentives, Collecting, Achievement* and *Meta-game*. Secondly, the 'Play as Work' category consisted of the following keywords: *Work, Repetition, Grinding, Boredom, Trivial, Tedious, Satisfying,* and *Reality.* Thirdly, the 'Motivations of Play' category consisted of the following keywords: *Rare Items, Resources, Experience points, 100%, Levelling Up, Strategies, Master,* and *Challenge*. Lastly, the 'Cheats' category consisted of the following keywords: *Cheats, Bots, Macros, Power Levelling* and *Automation*. Synonyms for each of the keywords were used so that associated words and phrases were also screened for.

Content Analysis

Using the developed coding scheme, I performed a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis process was split between the screening of mechanics, based on the previous four categories, and games the forum users had mentioned. During the process of analysis, the use of meta-data was gathered to categorise the messages. Both the forum name and Uniform Resource Locator (URL) were recorded for each of the forum threads. The forum name were used for the data collection process to record the highest mentioned website (See Table 1). Moreover, the thread names were also recorded in order to highlight that the topic followed the needs of the project.

The second stage in the analysis process comprised of the categories detailed in the coding scheme. The first category, 'Rewards', was separated into the positive and negative player experience during the second round of analysis as, throughout the literature, discussions of polarising effects were common when it came to certain conditioning tools. As previously mentioned in the literature, there were differing outcomes for players when it came to treating video games as work. Therefore, 'Play as Work' was split between the positive and negative connotations of the forum users' messages. The third category, 'Motivations of Play' focused on what engaged the players during their play experiences. This category was not divided into whether players found it a positive or negative experience, due to the literature discussing punishing features as one of the most important motivators. The fourth and final mechanic category, 'Cheats', highlights the different methods players use to cheat within games. Compared to the literature, this category solely focused on the mechanics players use instead of their effects. However, players naturally discussed their opinion on the effects of

cheats with other users in a game environment. In addition to the four categories discussed, a further grouping was added for messages that are unable to be placed into the category but are relative to the topic. This 'Extra Comments' category would be subjected to personal interpretation; however, if the messages do not contribute to the discussion, they shall be treated as an anomaly instead.

Conversely, the process that analysed games the forum users mentioned consisted of two additional categories, aside from the meta-data. In the first category, each time a video game title was mentioned, the whole message would be recorded for analysis. In contrast, the second category is centred on listing all the games and genres that were mentioned within the forum thread. Video games and genres were only recorded if they had a negative connotation associated with them.

For each message, the coder (myself) would determine whether each category was present; if it was, then the message would be recorded to the appropriate category. For messages that did not fit the categories, they were either not recorded or added to the 'Extra Comments' category accordingly. Moreover, once all the forum threads and messages had been screened, the second round of analysis was conducted. This analysis focused specifically on the reasons given by the users on why they either liked or disliked 'chore-like' mechanics throughout the different categories. The examples that were found will be illustrated during the results discussion, as well as being used as a basis for the design recommendations.

RESULTS

Game & Genre

Through the content analysis of online forum discussions, a total of 64 posts were screened with 3036 messages collected. Firstly, in regards to genre, RPG was mentioned eight times in six different threads, with MMORPG, MMOG, First Person Shooter (FPS), Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG), Adventure, Strategy and Simulation also being mentioned. Secondly, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) was the most cited video game title (See Table 4), with it mentioned 16 times in a total of 10 posts.

Table 2: Top most cited genres

Genre	Times Cited(Total = 23)	Threads
RPG	8	6
MMORPG	4	3
MMOG	3	3
FPS	2	2
JRPG	2	2
Adventure	2	2
Strategy	1	1
Simulation	1	1

Mechanics

By analysing the four categories of mechanics, a total of 448 quotes were collected. 'Play as Work (Negative)' accumulated the most with the category being mentioned 159 times in 45 different threads. Each of the categories featured a commonly mentioned keyword, as discussed in the 'development of the coding scheme' section of the study. Within the 'Reward' category, the keyword 'Achievement' was mentioned 73 times in 20 different forum posts. In both 'Play as Work' categories, positive and negative, the keyword 'Grinding' was

mentioned a total of 104 times. The difference is highlighted with the positive connotation being found in 37 times in 17 different forum threads in contrast to the negative connotation being found 67 times in 29 different forum threads. In addition, 'Levelling Up' was the most common keyword in the 'Motivations of Play' category, being discussed 17 times in 12 different threads. Finally, the most cited keyword in the 'Cheats' category is 'Cheats' with a total of 50 times cited, in seven different forum threads.

Table 3: Top most cited category

Category	Times Cited (Total = 448)	Threads
Play as Work (Negative)	159	45
Reward	108	28
Motivations of Play	63	25
Play as Work (Positive)	62	29
Cheats	56	15

RESULTS DISCUSSION

Throughout the analysis of content found, a series of patterns emerged in accordance with the previous literature that has been researched. What will follow is a discussion of each category, with reference to the previously mentioned literature either supporting or disputing the results. Moreover, the discussion will feature specific reasons why players found certain mechanics positive or negative, with quotes supporting their reasoning. The quotations presented are unaltered; however, context is given before each for added coherency. In addition, there were no anomalies found during the content analysis, thus there will be no discussion on the 'Extra Comments' category.

Games & Genres

The top cited genres consisted of RPGs and MMORPGs (See Table 2). The literature that was discovered featured discussions heavily revolved around RPGs and MMOGs, with five of the seven papers in the category of 'Play as Work' mentioning the genres in their studies. In comparison, the most cited game titles (See Table 4) are all considered either RPGs, MMOGs, or the descriptor of being 'Open World' games. The 'Open World' descriptor applies to the RPG genre, as they should offer a potentially large in-game world for the player to freely explore (Hitchens & Drachen 2008). However, an additional reason why these specific video games were mentioned the most is due to their popularity. *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) has sold 25 million copies as of 2012 (Parfitt, 2012), *Red Dead Redemption (2010)* selling 15 million copies (Makuch, 2017) and *Assassin's Creed (2007)* selling 8 million copies respectively (Ubisoft, 2009). The large volume of sale figures illustrates the widespread popularity and discussion of these games. Although they are the most mentioned game titles to contain 'chore-like' aspects, due to their popularity they are open to scrutiny that is more explicit than other video game titles. Therefore, the results of the most cited game and genres demonstrate the viewpoint of the popular video game demographic but the following discussion on mechanics are applicable to a wide range of video games and genres.

Table 4: Top 10 most cited video game titles

Game Title	Times Cited(Total = 72)	Threads
Grand Theft Auto IV	16	10
Red Dead Redemption	8	5
Assassin's Creed	8	4
Final Fantasy XIII	8	2
World of Warcraft	7	7
RuneScape	6	3
Borderlands	6	1
Grand Theft Auto V	5	2
Pokémon	4	4

Final Fantasy XII	4	4

Rewards

As the results highlight, players regarded 'Achievements' as the most 'chore-like' reward feature with 43 negative comments, in comparison to the 26 that were found to be positive. This contradicts the literature, which found earning meta-game rewards such as 'Achievements' as being one of the biggest motivators of play (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010). This is due to a majority of players complaining about the issues of "cookie cutter achievements," in order to elongate the longevity of the gameplay. This is emphasised in a player discussing the large quantity of achievements found in *Killing Floor 2* (2016):

> "I'm getting really really tired of all the cookie cutter achievements (although the difficulty-based ones are fine). There are 164 achievements now and only 2 of them aren't cookie cutter boringness. Kill a siren before she screams (meh, should be n sirens, not just 1) and kill Patty before he heals. We need more achievements like those that require you to do something interesting rather than something you were just going to do anyway. Headshottting a stalker while she's upside down is a great suggestion. Also destroying all of Hans's shields without letting him drain."

The player's issues with 'Achievements' are also discussed in Juho and Veikko (2011) with the potential problems of the meta-game reward mechanism. They discuss that 'Achievements' are rushed in post-production, which has significant impact on the quality of 'Achievements' and can further affect the whole gameplay experience. Therefore, the social status and 'bragging rights' that achievements are synonymous with, are unable to outweigh the

detrimental effects of badly designed achievements (Cruz, Hanus & Fox, 2015). Nevertheless, certain player types thrive on repetitive tasks in order to 'kill time'. Kallio, Mayra and Kaipainen (2010) study highlights certain types of players, 'Time Killers' and 'Gap Fillers', who play games regularly in order lessen the time between tasks in their daily lives. Thus, examples of 'Achievements' that focus on elongating gameplay will be favoured by these player types.

Table 5: Top 10 most cited keyword

Keyword	Times Cited	Threads
Achievements	73	20
Grinding (Negative)	67	29
Work/Chores	51	26
Cheats	50	7
Grinding (Positive)	37	17
Repetition	27	22
Collecting	23	10
Boredom	20	16
Tedious	20	13
Levelling Up	17	12

Although a majority of players found 'Achievements' to be a 'chore-like' mechanic, a minority (26 comments) of players praised the meta-game reward system. Players highlighted that acquiring 'Achievements' added a sense of satisfaction, fun and competition to their gameplay experience. Similarly, literature has discussed specific player types that revolve around the feeling of satisfaction and desire through the achievement of goals (Yee, 2006a). Additionally, a meta-game reward system such as 'Achievements' is able to create a 'social capital'. Medler (2011) discusses the effect of how player dossier systems are a means for players "sharing gameplay data socially between players in addition to players reflecting on their own data" (Medler, 2011). The minority of these small social communities that are publically interconnected offer similar benefits to social networks that provide a social capital.

Similarly found in literature that discusses ‘Achievers’ (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006a), one player mentions how ‘Achievements’ cater towards specific player groups:

> “I think the point of these hard-to-get trophies is to cater to the "hardcore" crowd. Getting all the trophies in a few hours is hardly the definition of a true achievement. If you need to put in 400 hours of online gaming ... so what? Having achievements for different groups is good, I think.”

Play as Work

Overall, the results deemed ‘Play as Work (Negative)’ the most mentioned category, which highlights the detrimental attitudes players have towards video games as work. Through comparing the two categories and keywords, it further cements the notion that players are far more negative towards ‘chores’ than positive. The notion of games being a ‘chore’ is commonly found within the negative category, with it being cited 51 times compared to the 12 times it was associated positively. This opposes a majority of the literature that was found, which connoted that games can be deemed ‘satisfying work’ (McGonigal, 2011). However, players have given examples on how they combat the feeling of games becoming a chore. In this extract, the player denotes that if a game is becoming a chore, the player must not view the game as a series of tasks:

> “What ends up happening is that I'm viewing it as a chore, and with all chores, I just put it off. So, if this has happened to you, how to adjust your frame of mind so you want to play the games again, not to "finish and move on the next", but to just have fun with them again.”

Although some players suggest that video games becoming a chore is due to a certain frame of mind, the literature suggests designers must not let players become aware of the game's true nature. Yee (2006c) suggests that the purpose of all video games is to "train a player to work harder while still enjoying it" (Yee, 2006c, p.70). Game designers must construct the reward mechanisms in specific ways in order to train players to drive pleasure from the work that they are doing within the video game.

Within the two separate 'Play as Work' categories, the belief that games are 'repetitive' is significantly greater in the negative category (mentioned 27 times) compared to the positive category (mentioned 6 times). The literature discusses the repetitive nature of gameplay itself, with Lindley (2005) emphasising the creation of gameplay gestalts. Furthermore, Anderson (2009), during his discussion of the common issues of why people quit MMOGs, details the significant amount of real-world time players must dedicate in order to be successful in the game world. This is further emphasised by Rettberg (2008) who gives an example of why players must perform time-consuming repetitive labours tasks, due to higher-ranking superiors encouraging them to gather resources to be effective. Players have also discussed similar instances of repetition affecting their gameplay experiences:

> "For instance, I was really Loving playing Deus Ex recentally, enjoying the many routes and options you could take, the stealth elements, talking to people who diss you for not saving them, but then it all boiled down to "Sneak round corner, shoot some guy, person says something again blah" and I stopped playing."

Additionally, players stressed that games are seen as more tedious than satisfying, with 'tedious' being mentioned 20 times compared to the five times in which 'satisfying' was mentioned. Yet again, the literature emphasises that developers must create rewards which are worth the effort for the player. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) discusses the importance of players not becoming bored of the gameplay experience as if they are "not being confronted with a rich set of choices in an entertaining pattern of experiences", their engagement will be lost (Salen & Zimmeran, 2003, p.347). Similarly, players have discussed that tedious tasks, such as grinding, create a sense of boredom due to artificially extending a play experience:

> "Continual grinding is a boring waste of time out of which you are at least theoretically getting something out of each transaction, but in random grinding then each transaction may as well not have happened unless you get that random drop. Both are terrible and exist only to pad out a game"

The most appealing and disliked mechanic mentioned within both 'Play as Work' categories was 'Grinding'. Certain demographics of players found the activity to be a relaxing experience that adds to personal growth and progress. Although the notion of grinding is repetitive, it is due to the satisfying materialistic gain that keeps players engaged after hours of grinding. Rettberg (2008) exemplifies this point by suggesting the appeal of grinding is due to the "subconscious of the capitalist mind, which has been trained to appreciate work itself as moral good" (Rettberg, 2008, p.32). This is illustrated by a user explaining the reasoning behind why they had grinded on certain games:

> "Grinding on games though, I've done that, I remember many hours on the PSP playing Disgaea and Castlevania S.O.D leveling up characters and ONE

> PARTICULAR SWORD (I already had a sword which could dice up enemies faster than God but this one could kill them ....exactly the same, BUT WITH MORE DAMAGE!) Now at certain points in a game where you can level up stats and gain items, your character is already GOD but you keep on going. I think it's purely to do with those lovely Numbers that appear during combat or besides things, Sure 4000 is enough damage to kill in one hit but 9999, Now THATS a number I want to overkill my opponents with!"

Nevertheless, the activity of grinding is also seen as a negative aspect of video games. Throughout the analysis, players have detailed their complaints about grinding. These consist of grinding being time consuming, deskilling the player, as well as being used as a tactic by developers to monetise games. Similarly, certain literature has discussed grinding being used as a monetisation tactic. Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010) identify the intentional use of inconvenient gameplay elements as a form of marketing. This was further emphasised by a forum user detailing their opinion on grinding in a free-to-play game:

> "Unfortunately, in a F2P title, it's almost exclusively used to monetize the game. The grind is a minefield designed with enough easy and enough tough sections to make it untenable for the typical person without payment WITHOUT irritating them so much they walk away. If Obsidian can somehow do what basically no other MMO has done, awesome. But I'm not exactly bullish on the possibility."

Motivation of Play

The activity of ‘grinding’ is intrinsically linked with the process of ‘levelling’, which was the most mentioned motivation of play, being cited 17 times in 12 different forum posts. The action of levelling player avatars are incorporated within the most frequently mentioned genres, RPGs and MMOGs, where players must participate in “completing quests or missions, slaying beasts, crafting artefacts or haveresting minerals gain experience points that, at times, result in levelling up” (Manninen & Kujanpaa, 2007, p.26). The majoirty of literature declared the reward of levelling up as the most imprortant motivator for players (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010; McGonigal 2011; Rettberg, 2008). Nevertheless, players gave additional reasons why levelling is seen as a chore. A forum user explained that levelling and grinding are seen as an easy option to defeat a game compared to the use of strategy:

> “EXP/leveling as a whole is just such a sloppy way to pace a game. Avoid too many fights and it's fuck you, you literally can't beat this boss right now, go back and punch all the giant spiders you skipped. Grind too much and you don't even have to bother with strategy, you've paid your way out of having to actually learn and think about the game and the price was your free time.”

‘Levelling’, being the most mentioned motivation of play, and ‘grinding’ being the most controversial mechanic amongst players, are directly linked. The notion of grinding is predominately associated with levelling up in a game, with alternative methods of play (cheating) focusing on avoiding the grind to increase a player’s level with minimal effort (Webb & Soh, 2008; De Paoli, 2012; Yan & Randell, 2005; Parker, 2007). The second highest mentioned mechanic in motivations of play, ‘experience points’ directly correlates to the

activity of levelling up. As Wang and Sun (2011) highlight, in the majority of games in which players control avatars (such as RPGs), an experience point reward systems is used in order to level up when goals are achieved. Experience points represent a reward of facility as they "enable a player's avatar to do things they couldn't do before or enhance abilities they already possess" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p.343).

Moreover, players gave alternate reasons why certain motivations of play are also considered chores. The following motivations of play mirror the taxonomy of video game structural characteristic created by King, Delfabbro and Griffiths (2010). Issues with controls became a frustrating element of play, as they were not seen as intuitive for players to use. Controls for players are one of the critical elements in Lazzaro's (2004) 'Keys' in the category of 'Hard Fun'. For players to be offered a compelling challenge, designers must balance the game difficulty through the players control (Lazzaro, 2004). Furthermore, players complained that motivations of play, such as 'Unlockables', 'Difficulty' and '100% Completion', are considered chores. The justifications given are similar to previously mentioned issues with these mechanics, which consists of the lengthening of gameplay through either poor design or repetitive grinding.

Cheats

Players acknowledged they have cheated 50 times in seven different forum posts, which include the use of cheat codes, walkthroughs and guides. These methods of cheating are seen as more acceptable than the use of bots in a multiplayer setting (Consalvo, 2007). These forms

of cheats are indicative of commonly identified cheating behaviour, in which players cheat to either progress in the game or to gain advantage over others (Doherty *et al*., 2014).

The majority of reasons players gave for cheating can be found in these three categories: to shorten the activity of grinding, an incentive to carry on playing a completed game and the usage of cheats in an online setting. As declared previously, players found the activity of grinding frustrating, therefore certain players employed cheats to shorten the repetitive process. The literature refers to the process of automatic play that is employed by players using bots and macros to automate gameplay and levelling (De Paoli, 2013). However, automation is frowned upon in an online setting (MacBride 2007), as this player describes the use of power levelling in MMOGs:

> "Power Leveling is exploiting EXP, thus why most MMOs don't allow such a tactic to work anymore. Developers have gotten wise and are preventing players from exploiting game mechanics in such a way that they can cut down on time just to grind out levels. Or, they go the Blizzard route and just give away max level characters if you pay for them."

Nevertheless, in a single player experience, the use of cheats is acceptable. Players admit the use of cheat codes is morally acceptable due to the fact "they are often supplied by the developer and these do not break the rules of that game" (Doherty *et al*., p.2). Players discussed the enjoyment and satisfaction of using cheats that offer an alternative method of play:

> "When I play through a game for the first time, I don't like to use cheat codes / guides / anything. When playing through the game for a second/third/whatever time, I have no problem with using cheat codes or strategy guides. In fact, I enjoy the fact that some games offer "bizarre" cheat codes to add some enjoyment to the game - for example, a game that allows you to cheat and gain a gun that fires tomato mortars."

DESIGN DISCUSSION

Following on from the results and their analysis, the future design considerations will now be discussed. The analysis highlighted that mechanics, including 'Grinding', 'Achievements' and 'Levelling Up', are deemed the most significant for players (See Table 5). With each mechanic, there shall be a discussion consisting of existing iterations of these systems in games. Moreover, I shall create recommendations for developers to improve the most common issues players have highlighted through the analysis. This section will enable designers to engage with player feedback in order to evolve the mechanics that have been a staple of specific genres.

Grinding

Modern RPG games have combated the existence of grinding by giving additional sources to gain experience points (EXP) in order to level up. *Pokémon Sun & Moon* (2016) has implemented an experience sharing system within their game. Once players have equipped the 'Exp.Share' item, all the Pokémon in the players' party that did not participate in the battle

gain 50% of the EXP earned. This item is acquirable early on in the game, thus reducing the amount of time the player might need in grinding their Pokémon to higher levels. Similarly, *Final Fantasy XV* (2016) contains an 'Ascension System' where players are able to effectively increase their aptitude to gain Ability Points (AP) and EXP earned. The exploration category allows players to spend AP in order to gain several skills that increase the amount of AP and EXP gained through completing necessary, but repetitive, tasks. Unlocking skills for driving, riding Chocobos, camping and engaging in combat enables the player to gain additional AP and EXP for mundane features such as travelling (which, in an open world game is a re-occurring necessity). Additional RPG games have created reward systems as an incentive for completing grinding activities. *The Lord of the Rings Online* (2007) introduces a 'Title' system that enables players an option to equip titles alongside their name. These titles can be acquired in several ways, such as completing Quests, Deeds, Crafting and social interactions. However, there are varieties of titles that are rewarded through defeating numerous enemies. For instance, a player is rewarded with the title 'Goblin-bane' for defeating 100 goblins in Moria. Although these titles are an example of illusionary rewards, for certain player types, it gives an extra motivation of play to collect as many titles as possible.

The following improvements to the mechanics of grinding are grounded in the literature, analysis and game examples that have been discussed. Instead of the need for grinding, developers must offer alternative ways to gain resources. Players must have multiple sources to gain experience points that vary from one another. If the primary source of EXP for a game is from combat, players must not only be able to gain EXP from other mechanics such as quests and travelling, but should also be incentivised to use alternative combat methods to

gain additional rewards. This is further emphasised by the next recommendation, which details that designers should promote the use of strategy and tactics instead of purely relying on statistical gameplay. Players' primary focus should not be on grinding their avatar's level 'to the extreme' in order to defeat all the enemies, but the mechanics on offer must allow players to use strategy; resulting in a personal growth in player skill instead of the deskilling through repetitive gameplay. Moreover, tactics will emphasise a player's intrinsic motivation, as they will continuously play in order to pursue the reward of personal growth. Alternatively, instead of players employing cheats to automate the grinding process, designers should implement their own automation features. An 'Auto Battle Function' is similar to a bot that will simulate the battles without any player effort. With a lack of effort, players can quickly gain experience or levels in order to progress through the game.

Levelling Up

The mechanic of Levelling Up is not just present in RPGs; a multitude of genres have used it with varying degrees of success. *Forza Horizon 3* (2016) allows for a variety of methods in order to level up their account. The largest quantity of experience points is gained from completing and winning races, although, players are able to earn additional points from just driving around the virtual open world counterpart of Australia. In order to combat players repeating the same events for experience points, the game allows players to create or participate in procedurally generated missions. These missions reward players the same amount of experience given to them by racing in traditional events created by developers.

MMOGs have designed features in order to lessen the task of levelling up. *Guild Wars* (2005) limited the maximum level for players at 20, emphasising player skill compared to the process of acquiring maximum level. In contrast, both *Guild Wars 2* (2012) and *World of Warcraft* (2004) players are able to purchase level boosts which, when activated, will immediately raise your avatar to the max level. Players who have already traditionally levelled a character to max level are given the choice on their secondary characters to boost them to maximum level in order to participate in content they would not be able to otherwise. Furthermore, *World of Warcraft* (2004) implemented a 'Resting System' in order for players to avoid level grinding. By resting or logging out at any inn in the world, the player will receive a 'Rested' modifier which gives players a bonus to the experience gained from combat. Through this system, designers increase the amount of experience players are earning per level as well as catering for various player types found in the game.

The following recommendations are based on the literature, analysis results and game examples that have been discussed. Similar to grinding, players must have a varied amount of content in order to level up. Designers must create content that is varied and not repeated instances of what players have previously done. User-generated content is an alternative strategy, as instead of designers constantly creating new content, designers equip players with the tools to create their own instances. Furthermore, players should not feel the need to repeat the same level or action in order to level up. If the player is unable to pass an obstacle found within the game after multiple attempts, designers need to offer an alternative strategy. Designers can offer temporary solutions such as items that boost a

player's level or by even lowering the difficulty, therefore avoiding the need for players to grind.

Achievements (Meta-Game Systems)

Achievements in this instance encompass the varying meta-game reward systems that companies use in their services. *Ubisoft Club* (2012) provides their players with incentives for completing actions in order to gain 'Club units' that they can redeem for rewards. In addition, by completing actions, they add to increasing your overall Club level, which can be compared with other players. For instance, in *For Honor* (2017), completing the action 'Warlord Initiate' (Play as the Warlord for the first time in Story Mode) rewards the player with 10 Club units. The player is then able to purchase a 'Viking Emblem Pack' for 10 Club units, which contains unique symbols to be used in the game. This system motivates player to complete actions in order to unlock in-game content. Additionally, *Steam* (2003) has created a Trading Card System, where players are rewarded with 'Cards' by playing a game for a certain length of time. Once a player obtains a card, they have multiple options. Firstly, players are able to create badges; these badges are earned by collecting all the trading cards that are obtainable for the specific game. Once collected, the player crafts a badge, which also rewards them with an emote to be used in their Steam Chat, as well as a background for their profile. Secondly, players are able to break down their cards into gems. These gems allow players to create booster packs which, when opened, give players additional cards for specific games. Lastly, players are able to sell their cards on the Steam Community Market for a real world value. Once sold, the money is deposited in the user's Steam Wallet to be used to purchase games

or additional cards. Steam has created an additional game that extrinsically motivates players due to the real world value put on the trading cards.

The following recommendations are not just for achievements but meta-game reward systems in video games. As the aforementioned examples suggest, unlocking achievements should not just give players an illusionary reward but a substantial reward they are able to use in the game. If developers are unable to implement a system for in-game items, collectibles associated with the game such as music and artwork are an appropriate substitute. Certain players will be further motivated to complete achievements in a game that has a substantial reward compared to a reward of a singular numeric value. Furthermore, players have emphasised that achievements should be developed around player skill instead of a repetitive action. Achievements should not consist of large quantifiable numbers that players must complete (Cookie Cutter Achievements). Achievements should give an appropriate challenge grounded in the setting of the game. In the same vein, multiplayer achievements or unlockables should not be used, and, if so, they should be easy to obtain. Players saw multiplayer achievement as large quantifiable repetitive actions, and some argued that when a game's player base has dropped, it is increasingly more difficult to obtain that multiplayer achievement.

CONCLUSION

Through a directed qualitative content analysis on online forum discussions, this study highlighted the varying perspectives on how gaming can become a chore. The analysis found

that a majority of players disliked video games becoming a chore. The results highlighted ‘Grinding’, ‘Achievements’ and ‘Levelling Up’ as mechanics most identifiable with being a chore. Furthermore, the study revealed traditional genres such as RPGs and MMOGs containing a majority of the mechanics discussed. The aforementioned genres have also been blended with others, creating hybrid genres that also include the mechanics that are found to be a chore. However, the negatives of these mechanics do not apply to all players. There are certain player types that exemplify chore mechanics as ‘satisfying work’, connoting there is a sense of gratification from completing repetitive tedious tasks.

Recommendation List

Designers are already trying to combat the issues by implementing different mechanical iterations into their games. The study highlighted several recommendations designers can abide by in order to make their games more appealing to the majority who disliked ‘chores’. The set of recommendations is grounded in the research from the literature that was reviewed, as well as the analysis that was performed within this project. The following list of recommendations are improvements to several mechanics that have been discussed throughout the project:

- The need for a constant and steady amount of rewards that the player receives for instant gratification.
- Meta-game rewards need to be grounded in the skill of the game, and given a suitable reward, whether it is to be used in or outside the game (i.e. artwork or music, skins).
- Multiplayer meta-game rewards should be non-existent.

- Players need to be given varying activities to complete in order gain experience points or levels for their player.
- Instead of players relying purely on stats, gameplay needs to incorporate player strategy and tactics to advance.
- Automated features (similar to bots) can be used by players to speed up a repetitive process.

Limitations and Future Research Efforts

The scope of the research project was quite extensive. However, due to the limited time frame, the size of the project was small compared to the material that was on offer. Likewise, the Google search engine was the only platform used, with other search engines such as Bing unable to be utilised due to time constraints. As a result, the search results are not an overall accurate representation of what is being discussed in the multitude of online video game forums.

Furthermore, as Hsieh and Shannon (2005) debate through the use of directed qualitative content analysis, "researches might be more likely to find evidence that is supportive rather than nonsupporitve of a theory" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p.1283). The extract highlights that throughout the research process; there could have been a strong bias in what I was collecting due to it supporting my statement. This is further emphasised with only having one coder screening the messages, which could provide additional evidence on the limitations of the study. However, the risk of unreliable data was reduced due to the coding scheme being

intrinsically linked to literature that was previously researched. Furthermore, the inability to have the first-hand experience with the mechanics and games mentioned by the players did not allow for a deeper analysis of their opinions and reasoning. With such supplementary analysis, the recommendations made towards designers would have been greatly improved with specific gameplay examples.

The goal of the project was to improve design principles that have been repeated across several games and genres. Overall, this has been addressed with the recommendations for designers to improve the mechanics that are seen as chores for players. However, there is no evidence to delineate whether these recommendations will improve a player's enjoyment or engagement. Player types are lightly touched upon due to time constraints, even though during the initial stages it was a key element of the project. For future endeavours, the focus shall be on the effects of different mechanics on diverse player demographics, as highlighted by the 'player types' literature. For instance, further studies could consist of observing players who engage in 'chore-like' mechanics in a game environment. This would enable for an immediate report on players' emotions and mentality, thus allowing detailed examples of what exactly makes these mechanics chores for players. Alternatively, the creation of a playable video game based on the recommendations given would highlight the validity of the study's outcome.

WORDS = 8, 466

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