



Gaming and Audiences – An Overview

The games industry is one of the success stories of the past two decades. Whilst other areas of entertainment such as the film and music industries have found themselves struggling to maintain and increase profits, gaming has proved itself to be popular and profitable (making \$57bn in 2009). Like other media industries, it is having to adapt to technological changes in the rise of emedia, the threat of piracy and the challenges offered by changing audience behaviours. Gaming seems more adept at responding to modern challenges than some of its older counterparts.

In all this success, however, gaming comes in for much criticism. In some quarters it has become the most demonised aspect of the modern media and is often at the centre of debates about certain games' influence on audience attitudes and behaviours and the images and content of some games are often criticised.

This wide variety of types of games and the way people access them has made it very difficult to make generalised attempts to analyse gaming. One way of looking at games is to apply ideas from film and television analysis to attempt to explain the audience/game relationship focussing on the stories told within the games. This may or may not be valid given the largely passive nature of film audiences and the far more interactive nature of playing a game where the constructed story is secondary to the immersion within the story experienced by the player.



The aims of this Factsheet are to:

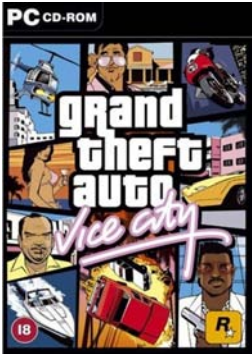

- Identify the main types of games and audience responses to them
- Identify the 'effects theory' arguments as they relate to games





Types of Games and Audience Pleasures

Modern electronic gaming is a huge and diverse area. There are many ways games can be played using different types of hardware and there are many different types of games which offer a range of diverse audience gratifications. Some games require specific hardware to access them (Playstation, Xbox etc.) whilst others can be played on multi-function machines such as phones, televisions and home computers. Some games are for single players whilst others allow interaction between two or, in some cases, potentially millions of other players.

As there are so many different types of games it might be worth putting them into some general categories. To a certain extent all games provide gratifications in that they are escapist and diversionary. Each of these types of games, however, provides distinct types of audience pleasure.

Type of Game	Description	Audience Engagement/Pleasures
Action Games	<p>The primary goal in an action game is to engage in combat to defeat enemies as the player moves through a location. Many of the games provide two or multi-player options. Example: <i>God of War</i></p> <p>http://www.psu.com/media/god-of-war-ii/god-of-war-2-boxart.jpg</p> 	<p>These games can provide narrative pleasures and reward the mastering of the combat techniques needed for success.</p>
Beat 'Em Ups	<p>These are simple games with limited narratives which largely involve physical combat. Many of these games have a two-player option which allows players to fight one another. Examples: <i>Street Fighter</i>, <i>Mortal Kombat</i>.</p>	<p>The main gratification within these games is visceral and based on the excitement of 'battle'. Players can learn to master specific 'moves' using the controllers and so achieve personal satisfaction as they become more skilful and, therefore, successful.</p>
Adventure Games	<p>These games provide the player with a mission which may involve moving through multiple environments and the game provides a narrative resolution.</p> <p>The protagonist will need to defeat antagonists throughout the narrative. Example: <i>Uncharted: Drake's Fortune</i></p>  <p>http://loot-ninja.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/12/uncharted-pics.jpg</p>	<p>Pleasure comes from progression through the narrative and the character development that occurs as the game develops. Adventure games often have elements of other games included in their presentation (often platform and/or shooter elements) which adds to the gratifications.</p>

Type of Game	Description	Audience Engagement/Pleasures
Shooter	First Person Shooters for example: <i>Doom</i> , <i>Wolfenstein 3D</i> provide game play from the protagonist's point of view whilst Third Person Shooters take an 'over the shoulder' perspective. As the name suggests, these games require the player to shoot their way through obstacles – some games replacing the usual handset with a plastic gun. This genre is extremely popular. Examples: <i>Call of Duty</i> , <i>Gears of War</i> .	The gratifications come largely from the challenging nature of the combats and the visceral presentation of violence. Challenges increase as the player moves through the game and so success brings reward and empowerment.
Platformers	A 2D or 3D space is navigated by the player moving across platforms to gain rewards. Example: <i>Mario Bros</i> .	No narrative pleasures but gratification created as moves are mastered and a sense of achievement is gained.
Sandbox Games	Or... open world games. A non-linear environment is provided and the protagonist has a range of different goals within the space rather than a single linear mission. Example: <i>Grand Theft Auto</i> .  http://static.squidoo.com/resize/squidoo_images/-draft_lens1963978module9327387photo_1209492126pc_grand_theft_auto_vice_city.jpg	An emergent narrative which allows the player freedom to make choices and progress through the game in their own way. The non-linear nature of these games increases personal satisfaction as the player's success is down to decisions made rather than a pre-defined narrative progression.
Racing Games	Simulation racing games recreate the experience of driving a car and require decisions based on driving skills to be made for success. Example: <i>Gran Turismo</i> Arcade racing games are simply focussed on winning a race. Example: <i>Mario Kart</i>  Mario Kart http://www.wii-games-wii.com/images/Mario-kart-wii.jpg	Simulation games provide cerebral pleasures as the player needs to make skill-based and strategic decisions. Arcade games are based on providing fun, entertainment and excitement.
Vehicle Simulations	Like simulation racing games these provide the experience of controlling vehicles, e.g. flying planes etc. Example: <i>Flight Simulator</i>	Cerebral pleasures as above and also satisfaction when skills are mastered. Other pleasures come from engaging in situations that are not available in 'real life' They provide aspirational and escapist pleasures.
Life Simulations	These are based on building a living environment for a 'Sim' (a person). These games allow many elements of the Sim's life to be selected and involve the development of families and relationships. Example: <i>The Sims</i>	These can be seen as aspirational as the player can create idealised living environments. Many of these games are based on the acquisition of material objects and these identify the success of the player. Often players identify themselves with their Sim.
RPG	RPGs combine strategy and combat. The player takes on a character and this character develops as more of the game is played. Examples: <i>Final Fantasy</i> , <i>Fable</i> and <i>Mass Effect</i> . There is much variety within this genre and game play tends to vary.	RPGs create identification between the player and the character and satisfaction as the character's abilities increase. Narrative pleasures are also present as are ideological ones and the players need to make choices based on the game's internal morality.
Strategy Games	A multi-player genre where players take turns to meet certain objectives. Players compete against each other to complete the objectives. Example: <i>Command and Conquer</i>	Competition and building strategy skills dominate in this genre and the strategy game provides satisfaction as the objectives are completed and rewards gathered.

Type of Game	Description	Audience Engagement/Pleasures
Music Games	<p>Players emulate playing an instrument in time to music. Some music games involve singing. Example: <i>Guitar Hero/Rock Band/SingStar</i></p> <p>http://blog.dmichaelclary.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/guitar_hero_package.jpg</p> 	<p>The increase in the skills required to be successful creates a sense of achievement</p>
Puzzles	<p>A challenge where the goal is simply to complete a task. Example: <i>Tetris</i></p> <p>http://neuronarrative.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/tetris-game-large.jpg</p> 	<p>Cerebral pleasures are created as the player completes puzzles. Skills are developed as the puzzles' difficulty increases and so personal satisfaction is created.</p>
Sports Games	<p>These games emulate real world sports and players play virtual representations. Some titles allow the player to create teams and tournaments. Example: <i>Fifa</i></p>	<p>A sense of achievement is created as players master the games being played. The element of competition adds to this gratification.</p>
Exergames	<p>These games allow the player to become physically involved in sports simulations. Pioneered by Nintendo Wii and <i>Wii Fit</i></p>  <p>http://www.blogthecoast.com/runway_ready/wii_fit.gif</p>	<p>Competition and physical exertion create pleasures within this genre.</p>
MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games)	<p>These on-line games are vast virtual worlds where players advance their own characters by completing increasingly difficult tasks. These worlds are populated by many other players and interaction between players and avatars is possible. Example: <i>World of Warcraft</i></p>  <p>http://moderateinthemiddle.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/world_of_warcraft_89.jpg</p>	<p>This genre provides RPG-like pleasures but also allows the player to enter a community where communication with others and cooperation is encouraged. Personal satisfaction is also gained when rewards are received and built up as the player progresses. Sometimes these rewards are monetary (both within the game world and outside as rewards can be sold to other players).</p>

Effects Theory and Games – a modern moral panic

In the 1950s the emergence of rock and roll was thought to be the start of the breakdown of western civilisation and culture. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the television was feared as it became more commonplace in homes and critics saw it as something that was ‘dumbing down’ the youth of the day. In the 1980s video rental bought unregulated horror films into the houses of thousands of young people and it was feared access to these ‘video nasties’ would cause moral and behavioural degeneration.

Popular media forms have a long history of creating moral panics and gaming has become the demonised media of the early 21st C. The fact that none of the predictions about rock and roll, television or horror films appear to have come true does not seem to put off some commentators from using a simple idea about audience, the hypodermic syringe theory (Laswell), to create a case against computer games.

Hypodermic syringe theory (sometimes called the magic bullet theory or the hypodermic needle model) claims that access to media texts can directly influence the actions or attitudes of the audience. The idea is that by seeing violent images the audience will be encouraged to act violently. This theory has been largely rejected in media studies for its overly simple ‘cause and effect’ model of media influence. It does not take into account the fact that different audience members may react differently to media images and it implies that audiences are rather simplistic and not able to make choices for themselves.

Several high profile violent events have been linked to gaming including the Columbine High School Massacre, The Interstate 40 Shootings and The Virginia Tech murders. In each of these cases much publicity was given to the perpetrators being known to have played on *Doom*, *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Counter-Strike* respectively. This basic idea of a cause and effect link between games and violent events is often reported. Tabloid newspapers and some politicians have made these simple connections when calling for the banning of titles such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Hitman*, *Carmageddon* and, more recently, *Saw* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. Reports that the US military use computer games to train and desensitise soldiers in preparation for battle has added to the concerns held about the impact of the violent nature of some games.

Whilst games have never been banned or censored in the UK (unlike many other countries), the content of games is often reported and discussed from the perspective of the potential harm that could be caused. The main cause for concern in many of the cases of complaints about individual game titles regards the violence depicted within the games. The representation of violence is often no more than can be seen in a cinema and often film creates much more realistic representations of violence and gore. The main issues with computer games seem to stem from the way the player is directly involved in the violence depicted on the screen.

Player Control and Choice

Unlike with a film or television programme the game player is not simply an observer of violence, they are an active participant in the violence themselves. The player has a certain amount of control within a game and can make decisions as to whether or not to act violently. Often, the choice to act violently is rewarded (as in *Call of Duty* titles) and gaming narratives in certain genres are dependent on that choice being made.

This makes the audience member more active and they are to some extent involved in the construction of narratives and representations in a way the film audience is not. For some gamers this is one of the major pleasures involved in gaming and the fact that control and choice equates to a notion of freedom within the game. *GTA IV* offers the player a choice of reward – either revenge or money. This reward is dependent on selecting the death of either the cousin or girlfriend later in the game.

Ideologies

Many of the more successful games depict violence as a way to get a job done or a way to further a character within the narrative. Of course, this can be seen within film texts too. Action movies allow protagonists to kill whoever gets in the way of meeting their goals. However, Hollywood films in particular create ideological differentiations between different motivations for violence. A hero can kill if it is to protect his/her country, home and/or family but a villain who kills for financial gain or to disrupt the rule of law will usually be punished for his/her violent behaviour. Many controversial games have few clear cut separations regarding the motivations of violence and some individual games can be seen to treat violence in a very ‘matter of fact’ way. Much of the violence in games is repercussion-free. The ultimate repercussion in terms of violence within a game is often the ‘death’ of the protagonist. This, however, is nothing more than a temporary set-back as a game can be re-set or restarted. The violence undertaken by the protagonist is also often free from negative outcome apart, perhaps, from a momentary blood splatter on the ‘camera’ as the protagonist moves on.

Although many games are violent and some present violence in an amoral way, this is not the case with all games.



http://cache.gawker.com/assets/images/9/2009/12/500x_hr3.jpg

Heavy Rain allows players to choose from a number of possible responses to a situation – some violent and some not. The game develops in different ways depending on the attitude of the player.

So the question remains, can violent games make players violent in real life? There have been many studies on this subject but a direct cause and effect connection has never been proven. Some argue that accessing violent imagery of this nature will have an impact on the player by desensitising him/her to violence, making violence seem less shocking and abhorrent in real life. Others argue that responses to violence are dependent on other outside factors such as parental control and social environment. At the other end of the scale there is an argument that, rather than encourage violent behaviour, accessing gaming violence allows the audience member to ‘act out’ violent impulses which may mean they feel less need to do so in real life. It is very unlikely that there will ever be definitive proof of violent games’ direct influence on audience behaviour.

Activity

Consider these quotes. Which side of the argument are you more likely to agree with and why?

- Video game publishers unethically train children in the use of weapons and, more importantly, harden them emotionally to the act of murder by simulating the killing of hundreds or thousands of opponents in a single typical video game. Grossman
- Repetition is a form of learning and a way of remembering things, and if children remember being rewarded for violence in virtual reality games, they are left prone to being more violent in reality expecting a reward. American Psychological Association
- Adolescents that don't play video games at all are most at-risk for violent behaviour...video game play is part of an adolescent boy's normal social setting. Kutner and Olsen
- Only children already predisposed to violence were affected by violent games. Swinburne University
- We clearly associate media violence to aggressive behaviour. But the impact was very small compared to other things. Satcher

Other Problems with Gaming

The common perception of gaming is that it is a solitary activity and this could be another reason for its demonization in mainstream responses. Games are argued to be detrimental to the social development of young players and they have been linked to rises in occurrences of childhood obesity due to the sedentary nature of playing a game. It has also been argued that gaming can be addictive with young people most vulnerable and with the possibility that addiction can lead to health and social problems.

Benefits

Not all commentaries on games focus on the negative. Gaming is seen to offer some benefits including the improvement of cognitive ability, problem solving and motor skills. They are sometimes seen as a safe outlet for aggression and are increasingly being used to train people to undertake tasks and as part of a learning environment. Some games encourage the exploration of ways to define personal identity and multiplayer games require certain levels of social engagement with other players, even if not directly. One study (University of Rochester) claims gaming can help improve eyesight.

Other types of games

The moral panic surrounding video games is largely centred on one or two of the genres of games whilst other genres are seen to be much more benign. Many games are completely non-violent and can be argued to be positive and constructive in terms of the activities the player is engaged in. RPG and shooting games tend to be the types that cause most moral outrage. In the past few years increasingly more games feature less violent gameplay and the Nintendo Wii has specifically focussed its marketing on child and family target audiences with simple platform games, music and exergame titles being its mainstay. Nintendo DS has targeted older audiences with puzzle games and both marketing strategies have proved to be extremely profitable.

Many modern games provide multi-player options whether this is as part of a sports based (*WiiFit*) or music (*SingStar!* *Guitar Hero*) competitions. Multi-player games include on-line games where competitions can take place between players in different locations and in the case of MMORPG millions of players come together to play on-line. *World of Warcraft* has well over 11.5 million registered players. Gaming is no longer, necessarily a solitary activity. On-line games require levels of social interaction.

Conclusion

Gaming is a massively popular and successful part of contemporary media. The gaming industry has developed recently to broaden gaming's appeal providing games for adults and females so it is no longer just the entertainment choice of 'teenage boys'.

Further developments are ongoing with more levels of interactivity (Microsoft's **Project Natal**) and **Cloud** technology removes the need for boxed games as games are located on-line and may be funded by subscription or 'pay to play' models.



Project Natal

<http://www.zath.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/project-natal-milo-2.jpg>

What is clear is that gaming is an expanding form. This may well keep it at the forefront of moral panics but these do little to damage its popularity.

Acknowledgements: This Media Studies Factsheet was researched and written by Steph Hendry. With thanks for invaluable contributions from Arnie Bennet, Damien Hendry and Stephen Lowry.

Curriculum Press. Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Media Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136