

Running head: LEARNING STRATEGIES IN EVERQUEST II

From NOOb to L33t:
learning strategies in Everquest II

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Abstract

Video games have exceptional potential to be utilized as education and learning tools. However, to bridge learning and playing an understanding of what methods players use to learn must be established. This study focuses on the world of Everquest II, a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMO). The different ways players learn and acclimate themselves to a new world reveal not only learning styles and habits of MMO. Players recruited to participate in the study answered a survey of questions about their experiences learning how to become proficient in an MMO environment like Everquest II. Results show that players rely heavily on experience and partake heavily in situational learning to become proficient in both material interactions with the game environment and socially within the game community. This knowledge opens up new avenues for practical use of MMO worlds in the classroom.

Overview

Video games have become an exceedingly popular form of entertainment, surpassing movie box office ticket sales in terms of revenue. As with any new form of media, there is great potential for applications within our society. One such application for video games and, in particular, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) is education. Studies have clearly shown that cognitive learning occurs during game play as players interact socially and materially with the designed game environment. This yields the possibility of someday integrating video games or MMOs into traditional classroom learning environments. But before we are prepared to do that, however, there is first a need to understand exactly how one learns in these virtual environments. Precisely, what strategies are effective in helping one learn to become a proficient player that is acclimated to and comfortable within a virtual environment; specifically, what practices contribute to how one learns to navigate and participate (both materially and socially) in the virtual world with ease and enjoyment.

This study focuses specifically on the world of Everquest II, a popular MMO published in 2005 by Sony Online Entertainment. Understanding these strategies is a key to establishing a basic understanding of how interactions within the virtual environment are effective methods of learning. The different ways players learn and acclimate themselves to a new world reveal not only learning styles and habits of MMO users but also what areas of game play present the greatest challenges when adapting

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to the new environment. Educators can develop ways to integrate these worlds into traditional learning environments in a manner that utilizes the potential of virtual worlds as new media learning tools. This is not only useful in terms of education but also highly valuable in understanding the nature of human computer interaction, highlighting for game designers and educators alike the areas of MMO environments that trouble player interaction and hinders adaptation and acceptance the most. Putting this knowledge to practical use opens up new avenues for technology in the classroom.

Literature Review

An analysis of existing research in related fields follows to establish a background knowledge upon which this study can build.

New media in the classroom

Technology and media have long served as a valuable tool useful in learning environments. Biddle and Rossi consider the properties of educational media as “any device or equipment which is normally used to transmit information between persons” that is used for educational purposes (Biddle, Rossi, 1966). In the classroom environment, media and technology engage students through new expanded avenues of communication beyond traditional pedagogical practices (Brunner, Tally, 2005).

New media that have emerged in the digital age take advantage of the latest technological developments: with the pervasion of computers in our society and the advent of the internet, the interactivity of new media and the convergence of computer networks have enriched our ability to communicate and interact (Flew, 2005). Classrooms are more and more frequently equipped with the latest technologies for teachers and professors to integrate them as useful learning tools (Provenzo, Brett, 2005).

The communication modality of new media can be utilized in the classroom in a variety of manners: not only as a means to disseminate information, new media allows interaction and exchange, and stimulates the student in the dynamics of problem solving (Biddle, Rossi, 1966). In essence, students “experience” new media; thus, learning becomes experiential.

Video games have emerged as a medium that encourages situational learning and that is ready to be utilized in the classroom. According to Flew, video games are unique in that the “the intensity of immersive play and interactive experiences associated with games place [video games] at the leading edge of both new media innovation” (Flew, 2005). Delwiche’s (2006) experiences with teaching with video games, particularly massively multiplayer online games, illustrate the value of video games as an educational tool that promotes situational learning because “social interaction, cooperation, and knowledge sharing is central to their enjoyment.” Clearly, forms of new media such as video games have potential as useful tools in educational environments.

Learning in virtual worlds

A defining characteristic of virtual worlds is that they are simulated environments where existence and experience in the virtual world function without the causality of effects in the real world (Turkle, 1994). This “psychosocial moratorium” that Erikson describes is the foundation for learning in virtual environments where players can take risks without suffering lasting consequences. The level of experimentation they permit allows an incredible sense of freedom within the context of the game world.

In Squire’s (2003) words, “by enabling [users] to interact directly with a model of a complex system, simulations place learners in a unique position to understand a system’s dynamics.” So how is an understanding of these dynamics manifested in MMOs? Players seeking to increase the power and skills of their avatars learn in a variety of ways the most efficient means for leveling in the community. Experience is integral to the learning process by which users can gather data from successful and failed attempts in game, find trends and models to describe the patterns they encounter, and predict potential outcomes based on a series of strategies and player controlled actions (Steinkuehler, 2005b).

Often progression within the context of the virtual world requires collaboration among a number of players. Yee (2004) suggests that aspects of game play such as challenging encounters create “high-stress crisis scenarios” that help in forming bonds and relationships. “Gamers are learning not just to play the game but to become members of game playing communities where gaming knowledge is shared among and across players” (Jenkins, Squire, 2005).

Ultimately the two key factors that contribute to learning in video games are social and material. The material design of the game itself is created “in ways that encourage and facilitate active and critical learning and thinking” (Gee, 2003). And second, the other people in the game facilitate learning as well (Gee, 2003). Peer to peer teaching and collaboration within the community foster emergent learning communities for players – essentially learning is social and environmental interaction in virtual worlds (Steinkuehler, 2004).

Experiential learning in human-computer interactions

Situational learning theory proposes that people learn naturally and effectively from experiences, associating and valuing past experiences so that they can call upon aspects of experienced situations to apply and adapt them to new experiences, effectively acquiring knowledge adapted from experienced situations. As Gee (2003) describes it, human learning and thinking is built on abstractions of embodied experience.

Human-computer interaction (HCI), as the manner in which users interact with computer systems through interfaces (Booth, 1989), is important for situational learning as it applies to virtual environments and learning within these environments. A social dimension of HCI has evolved from research in HCI design and Thomas suggests that “users’ interactions with systems are, in the most thoroughgoing way, informed by existing social practices, skills, norms, and by users’ reliance on constructed moment-by-moment understandings rather than abstract characterizations or procedural

'technical' knowledge" (Thomas, 1995). Evidently, the basis for human-computer interactions, much like other interactions, is founded in existing practices and situated experiences.

With regard to interaction design, Ayula's (2001) work focuses on modeling agents within a system that are designed to support collaborative learning environments that promote situational learning through communication and cooperation. In the case of massively multiplayer online games, the modeling of agents are manifested as environment objects with which the user, as a player, interacts – essentially building a sandbox where collaboration and interaction complement the material design of the MMO.

As new media becomes increasingly experiential, new opportunities emerge to introduce situated learning theories into the classroom. Research shows situated learning occurs within the virtual environments of MMOs through material and social interaction. As compelling and immersive environments, MMOs represent potential learning tool that would be valuable in a classroom environment.

Study Design

This study seeks to understand exactly how proficiency learning occurs in these virtual environments. What strategies are effective in helping one become a proficient player that is acclimated to and comfortable within a virtual environment? And what practices contribute to how one learns to navigate and participate in the material and social world with ease and enjoyment? Everquest II was the chosen virtual world within which to conduct this ethnographic study.

Participants were recruited from various forums about Everquest II and MMOs. The recruitment message in Appendix A was posted to several message boards including the official Sony Everquest II Forums, Allakhazam's Everquest II Realm, IGN's Everquest II VNBoards, and the forums of the Vindicator's, a guild on the role-playing server Antonia Bayle. The heavily trafficked forums run by Sony as the official Everquest II Forums were chosen because of their popularity among players as a community and information resource for the game. The Allakhazam and IGN boards are not affiliated with Sony but are popular information resources for players. As this study relates to learning strategies in Everquest II, these forums were selected because of the likelihood that visitors to these forums are players seeking out guidance and strategies to assist in their game play. More than half of the participants were members of the guild Vindicators who responded to a message posted on their guild forums. The larger response rate may be attributed to the close knit community and high level of maturity mandated in the guild environment. The result was a group of volunteers who were eager to participate and enthusiastically forthcoming in their experiences.

The list of questions attached in Appendix B was generated for this study and sent out to all participants by email. Email was chosen for convenience to allow respondents to reply at their leisure. The questions in Appendix B were chosen in order to elicit an overall perspective of the player's learning experiences in MMOs while leaving room for the participant to elaborate on specific instances in regard to each topic. In some cases, a second email was sent out to gather further comments and to clarify information. Comments cited in the results have been edited only for readability

and pseudonyms have been used in place of any identifiable names to preserve anonymity unless otherwise requested by the participant.

Findings and discussion

In addition to ethnographic observations of the Everquest II world, five players responded to the survey questions sent out via email. The responses indicated a range of experience levels from low level beginners to veteran players, one with a level 62 Paladin. All but one participant indicated that he or she had previous experience with MMOs and that Everquest II was not his or her first massively multiplayer online experience. All participants felt confident in their abilities as skilled for their level and comfortable in the virtual world, each mentioning having gone through a learning curve to reach their current proficiency and comfort levels. Each player shared unique personal experiences that offer a variety of perspectives on learning strategies in MMOs. While the number of participants in this study is far too small to make any general comments about the entire population of MMO gamers, the results of this study still offer insight into how players use different strategies to become proficient in virtual worlds such as Everquest II. A few trends might even be drawn from similar responses to some questions.

A majority of participants agreed that time was the most significant factor in mastering the MMO environment, and that the more time one dedicates to playing, the more proficient one becomes in the virtual world.

My gaming proficiency increases largely with the amount of time I spend grinding. - **yeti**

The most important part of playing any mmorpg is time management. Whether it be the fastest way to go from level x to level y, or the easiest way to gain money, those who discover the most efficient ways to accomplish their goals will have a better experience. - **deter**

Given the dynamic and immersive nature of MMOs it's not surprising to see that time logged in game, however, was spent in a variety of ways. Different participants indicated that real proficiency required dedicating time to mastering a number of facets in the game environment using multiple strategies to fully understand the game world. Several responses indicated that proficiency in game play increased with time spent repeating similar in-game encounters multiple times.

The old saying that practice makes perfect is true here. When you fail, you think of new ways to tackle the problem, try that, and then reassess. - **lark**

One recent experience was our series of Rahoptep raids. It took us three attempts over the course of three weeks to finally win. The first attempt was foiled, and we died quickly. The second attempt we fought a great fight, but just couldn't kill him. I parsed the logs that night to analyze the fight and was able to see that we weren't putting enough damage to overcome how fast he was healing himself! The third attempt, with a new strategy at hand based off of the collected data, proved successful. - **reven**

Participants also noted the importance of social interaction in the game as a valuable resource of information. Other players in the game formed a network of experience and expertise that was readily shared within the community.

It doesn't matter how much you play or how good you are, there are likely other players out there that are better. One of the benefits of a multiplayer game is being able to learn from other players. - **deter**

People are often very willing to give advice or share their knowledge if you ask for it. It's in everyone's best interests to share and ask for advice. - **reven**

You can learn from other players' experiences and their successes to help you become more proficient. Advice from someone who's been there and done that is helpful and recommendations or referrals to reputable crafters is immeasurable. - **lark**

Several participants described different motivations for interacting materially and socially in the virtual world. While most mentioned being motivated by a combination of material and social aspects, the majority felt strongly that the social community present in MMOs was the most important feature of the game.

Player to player interaction is the most significant element in MMO gameplay. - **yeti**

While social interaction is an integral part of the MMO experience, it is also, like any social space, an area where standards and expectations exist of its members. Integrating oneself within this space socially can be difficult for some players.

It's easy to come across the "wrong way" when entering these environments, as there is no way to communicate the emotion or body language that we take for granted in-person or over the phone. There are also social conventions that you'll find only in these types of games, and when not observed, people can get upset. - **reven**

It is interesting to observe that situational learning occurs not only from interacting with the game, but also with other players in the game. As reven notes, people quickly come to learn the social conventions unique to virtual worlds. Indeed, communication is necessary in the game for player interaction and key to teamwork that is required for party or raid encounters. When questioned about the game interface, however, a few respondents indicated frustration with chat interface that is the primary gateway for in-game communications.

Participants also described how the changing environment in the game put different demands on the player as he or she progressed through the levels. As players increased in level, new abilities and new strategies must be mastered – these transition stages required adapting one's previous knowledge of the environment and evolving it to fit the new demands of the game.

I think a hindrance is the transition from soloing to grouping with other players. When you first start to group with players, you have so much more to pay attention to, and learning your role in a group can take time. - **deter**

In many of these instances players resorted to out of game resources to garner new information and strategies to apply in game. Forums and online strategy guides were the most commonly mentioned out of game resources.

Out of game sources have no doubt saved me countless hours of frustration. - **hunter**

I find resources such as ogaming.com and the Sony EQ2 forums to be invaluable. - **reven**

Participants all felt that proficiency in MMOs does not require an innate ability one person might have over another. Given enough time and practice anyone could become adept and proficient in the virtual environment.

Conclusions

As mentioned, it is possible to draw general conclusions about learning strategies in Everquest II or MMOs in general. The sample available for study was far too small and not selected to be indicative of a typical player population.

The scope of the study only focused on a single MMO, Everquest II. A plethora of virtual worlds exist, and while many of them have common features, each one is unique. As such the results from Everquest II players are not indicative of all MMO players. The strategies and levels of proficiency required in the Everquest II environment differ significantly from other MMOs.

Nonetheless, the responses of participants of this study indicate a loosely similar experience in mastering the game. The methods used to become proficient in the virtual world are similar to strategies observed by other researches studying how learning occurs in MMOs. The experience of playing is pertinent to learning in game.

Clearly results show that players use a number of different experiential learning strategies to master the environment. As players noted the relationship to time committed in game and player proficiency, it is evident that learning is indeed a process that occurs within the virtual world. Learning from repeated encounters helped players develop skills in a trial and error method that is condoned in the MMO environment by the lack of long term or significant consequences of failure built into the game.

The social community present in MMOs is an exceedingly valuable learning tool for players. Learning from other people's experiences, sharing strategies, and researching information posted in forums and guides in the community outside of the MMO are all valuable sources from which players learn. The social space in game fosters learning as the environment demands cooperation to beat challenging encounters and develop all avenues of game content such as crafting. Much in line with Yee's (2004) description of "high-stress, crisis scenarios" found in game, one respondent in this

study noted how people are thrust into roles that demand leadership and teamwork. In these instances it not content learning that occurs but a wider set of social skills that develops from situational learning and applicable even outside the game environment.

It is evident that learning occurs frequently within virtual worlds and is necessary for adapting to and learning to be proficient within the game environment. However, as Gee (2003) notes "success without effort is not rewarding; and effort with little success is equally unrewarding." With the significant amount of time players commit to MMOs there must be a clear motivation that contributes to continued dedication and constant learning demanded by the game. As one respondent indicated in the survey:

Practice makes perfect. But practicing a skill without a goal or guidance is just reinforcing what you already know, and could potentially be training a bad behavior. - **reven**

The motivations mentioned by players indicate that the social facet of multiplayer games is not only a source of information and learning but indeed an integral part of the game that motivates players. Along with the material rewards won by participating in the game environment, social rewards exist too as a drive for players to participate. Just as Steinkuehler (2004) described, collaboration within the virtual world fosters the development of an emergent learning community.

From here further, more comprehensive study must be conducted about the learning strategies players use in MMOs. When an established understanding of effective methods is achieved, possibilities open for new uses of MMOs in educational environments. One day we may even see entire curricula designed around virtual environments that utilize the aspects of MMOs that most effectively encourage situational learning.

Appendix A. Sample recruitment message

Hello,

My name is Cameron, and I am an undergraduate enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts about what strategies help one become a proficient player that is acclimated to and comfortable with the game environment. I am interested in what practices contribute to how one learns to navigate and participate in the game world with ease and enjoyment. Additionally, I'm curious about what areas of the game players often find most difficult or least enjoyable and how they are a turn off and impede enjoyment of the game.

These interviews could take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an anonymous instant messaging connection. I will preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on how you adapted to the virtual world of Everquest II, please contact me at:

mmoresearch@gmail.com

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thanks in advance for your time.

Cameron

Appendix B. Interview questions

- How long have you been playing massively multiplayer online games and, in particular, Everquest II?
- How would you describe your comfort and proficiency within the EQ2 world?
- What methods and strategies do you use to become a proficient player in the game world?
- Are the controls and interface a hindrance to game play and feeling comfortable in the game world? How so?
- How has your proficiency in game benefited from the ability to experimenting multiple times across repeated encounters with mobs/duels/crafting/etc?
- How does the game narrative help you understand game play or improve your proficiency and comfort in the game environment?
- How do social encounters with other players help you become a proficient and learned player in the game?
- How has your proficiency in game benefited from out of game sources such as reading forums / guides / etc?
- What areas in the game have posed the greatest hindrance to mastering the game or even impeded the enjoyment of playing?
- Is it your opinion that people must possess a natural or innate ability to become proficient in MMO games or can anyone potentially master the environment?
- Describe a situation or experience in Everquest II where you felt you learned something new about how to play more proficiently either materially in fighting or crafting or socially.

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