# The Search for the Model Gamer

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#### Abstract

Games can be considered as open texts in the sense suggested by Umberto Eco, this gives rise to the concept of model readers. We can therefore postulate a question as to the existence of such an entity as a model game player. This paper suggests that there is indeed a model game player however, not as a single entity, but rather a composite of many different competences and expectations. A suggested taxonomy of model gamers is discussed, and the benefits of the application of these models are indicated, further research lines are also presented.

*Key-Words* : model gameplay, open text, design, games

## **1** Introduction

In his 1979 work, "Lector in Fabula" [1], the renowned Italian semioticist Umberto Eco discusses at great length the role of a reader in what he calls open texts. These are texts which allow the reader to bring to bear his/her own knowledge, experience and world view to the interpretation of what is being read. Thus it is not essential for authors of fiction to provide detailed accounts of every event, and extensive descriptions of every character; the reader can furnish much of the detail through a number of lexical, cultural and semantic mechanisms. For example choices of particular words to describe actions or items unlock in the reader an understanding of the words that are not just based on dictionary definitions, but on what Eco calls an "encyclopedia" of semantic and cultural associations, which enrich the description. These ideas are borne out by other authors in the field of textual/narrative analysis such as Barthes[2] who discusses the use of linguistic codes.

Eco introduces the idea of a *model reader*, who is fully equipped to furnish all of the appropriate associations within the text. A model reader possesses "a set of competences, which add content to the sentences used by the author" (free translation from the Italian). It is not expected that this reader will necessarily exist as a person, however it is hoped that most readers will possess at least some of the necesary competences to derive enjoyment, or extract information from the text being read.

While this work is primarily concerned with narrative texts, it highlights an interesting question in computer games. Are computer games "open texts" in the sense referred to by Eco? If so is there such a thing as an ideal gamer?

This paper examines interactive texts (of which computer games form an example) in order to explore these questions, and goes on to determine whether or not we can we model the ideal gamer, and if so how?

The initial retort might be "why do we want to model the gamer?" Should we be able to identify or formulate a model of the ideal gamer it will give insights into both the design and analysis of future games. The importance of this work relates to the growing use and interest in computer games not only for entertainment, but also training and education.

The first stage is in considering whether games can

be treated as open texts in the same sense as discussed by Eco.

### 2 Games as Open Texts

It is a contentious issue as to whether games can be considered as open texts. Some authors (for example Louchart[3]) argue that the application of noninteractive analytical techniques such as narratology to the analysis of games is inappropriate. The argument is that texts often have single authors, whereas authorship in a computer game is often distributed amongst a large team of designers and programmers. In spite of the numbers of people involved in developing computer games, what emerges is usually a product with an agreed semiotic framework. Single or composite authorship does not prevent games from being considered as open texts.

Other authors (particularly Frasca[4]) have argued that games are not narratives, but are rather simulations and as a result different semiotic systems apply. It is still the case that games can be considered as texts in the sense that they contain various lexical and semantic entities which require interpretation by the games player. The question is then to what extent computer game players bring semiotic associations to the games they play?

Some of the sociological studies of computer games players (in particular Yates and Littleton[5]) have examined the cultures that emerge from this pastime. In particular it is noted that games players consider themselves to have particular skills (effectivities), and select games to play on the possibilities for exercising these skills (affordances). Game genres are a key factor in determining how this match between effectivities and affordances is made. Yates and Littleton present evidence to show that game players construct elaborate edifices of genres and subgenres as a means of categorising the affordances of games. The importance of genre in game selection implies the existence of intertextual encyclopediae discussed by Umberto Eco and to some extent proves that games are open texts.

A study of the literature which explores why computer games are played is potentially a source of ideas in our search for ideal game players.

### **3** Why People Play Computer Games

Broadly speaking the reasons why people play computer games fall into two different categories: reasons intrinsic to the games they play, and extrinsic reasons (indicative of the social context in which games are played).

#### 3.1 Extrinsic Factors

In a paper by Chou and Tsai[6] (based on a study of 535 Taiwanese high-school students), a number of extrinsic reasons emerge as to why people play computer games. These include entertainment, social contact, the ability to avoid social contact, the enjoyment of violence.

These notions are further supported by a study by Griffiths et al[7] based on a survey of regular players of an online game Everquest[8][9]. Everquest is one of the most popular online Role Playng Games (RPG), boasting over one million players worldwide, and as such is a rich source of analysis of current cross-cultural, non-gender-specific game players.

Among the many interesting considerations raised by these studies are the apparent contradictions between the different reasons (seeking social interaction versus seeking isolation). Furthermore the Griffiths et al study highlights that many of the reasons why some players liked the Everquest game, were the same reasons why other players disliked Everquest.

This evidently has implications for the development of a model game player, and illustrates the complexity of the problem.

### **3.2 Intrinsic Factors**

The intrinsic factors refer to those qualities of a game that attract players in the first instances. This can include many factors relating to the level of challenge, the ability to improve performance or indeed factors relating to the interface.

A study by Vorderer et al[10] stresses the role of competition in the enjoyment of playing video games. The study focuses on: the typical characteristics of the playing process, and the function of the competitive elements; the players' disposition towards social competition. Citing earlier work by themselves they claim that playing a video game involves a sequence of situations which feature the following.

- Certain action possibilities.
- Imperatives to act.
- Resolving the imperatives to act by applying some of the action possibilities.
- A result which can affect the enjoyment of the player, and the setting up of the subsequent situation.

According to Vorderer it is the competitive element in the game that gives it its intrinsic appeal. "Winning" through a particular situation in a game can stimulate feelings of euphoria. Unsatisfactory outcomes will elicit adverse emotions, which in turn can stimulate a desire to succeed. Video games are only enjoyable if there are enough situations in which the player can win.

The Vorderer et al paper attempted to test two hypotheses.

- 1. Video game players expect a given game situation to be more enjoyable if they are offered a large number of different action possibilities, then is the case if there are fewer.
- 2. Video game players expect a given game situation to be more enjoyable if they are confronted with a competitive element than if such an element is missing.

They found that many action possibilities, combined with a strong necessity to act (competition in their words) led to more exciting games according to a survey of game players.

This leads to the question of whether a strong necessity to act is an indication of competition however, since many conventional narratives recall a strong necessity to act in situations that are not necessarily competitive. Notions of competition in this study need to be expanded.

In conclusion they claim that competition is an important part of the attraction of computer games.

They cite previous work in which other factors are considered important in the design of computer games. An earlier work by Malone in 1981, quoted in the Vorderer et al[10] study cites the following three areas as part of the appeal of computer games.

- 1. Challenge
- 2. Fantasy
- 3. Curiosity

These studies offer us an insight into some of the characteristics displayed or considered necessary by what could be termed the ideal player, however they do not address the issue of what "types" of players there are, and how then does this affect the style of their play.

Transferring the notions of Eco's model reader to computer games, we consider the notion of the model game player. Further exploration of these ideas (reported in Calvi[11]) reveal that there are not only model readers, but also different types of reader as well.

Drawing on narratological studies, it can be seen that narratives are constructed from complex textures of characters and events. These textures form what has been called by authors such as Calvino[12] and Borges[13] a *Labyrinth*. The role of the author is then to plot a course through the labyrinth, discarding material considered irrelevant or which the ideal reader can supply for his/herself. This gives rise to two different orders of readership, with first order readers being concerned with completing the journey through the labyrinth in the most expeditious manner, and second order readers who seek to explore the labyrinth and understand the author better.

We can postulate that in fact this model can be adapted to consider computer games and gamers i.e. a first order gamer (game player) who wants to complete the game-labyrinth expeditiously, and a second order gamer (game player) who tries to appreciate the work of the game's creators.

It is apparent from the literature that there are far more levels or orders of gamers than could be covered by this duality. A more comprehensive view might include some of the lists of possibilities discussed in the following section, though not exhaustive they are nonetheless insightful.

### 4 Model Game Player

Game players come in all sorts of sizes, disciplines and characters. Modern games are popular across all generations and genders, as such there is no profile (in the HCI sense of the word) which can directly be applied to game players. According to figures published on the Gamasutra site (a game designers resource used across the industry)[14] the average age of a game player is 28 and is usually Male. However these statistics do not really give any insight into designing generic games, or an appropriate approach to games analysis.

In our opinion the game player can be identified by their attitude towards playing the game (whichever genre of game that may be) and our initial discussions with forum groups etc revealed the potential for more orders of game player e.g. One example is taken from a game player's parental view (the so-called 4As approach);

*Addicts* - A to B in the shortest space of time finish the game complete

*Anoraks* - Those who want to take the game apart and find out why it does this, where and when and why it is different

*Artists* - who are interested in the artistic integrity and the shape of the world it is in.

*Awesome* - those who passively take in the spectacle.

While this 4As approach has some merit, this initial foray does not encompass the full gamut of possible styles or approaches. Further considerations have led us to postulate the following non exhaustive list:

 $Dedicated \ gamer \quad \text{- interested in the game as a whole}$ 

*Point Scorer* - Interested in getting across the "maze" as fast as possible never mind the graphics, the weapons etc always looking for a short-cut. There is currently a movement in achieving the fastest time to complete a game - the members film themselves and try and achieve recognition and fame for World Record status e.g. completing doom with just a pistol etc.

*Hacker* - Interested in finding loopholes in the game play in order to identify different ways of beating the game (engine or designer).

Artist - more interested in the art of the game.

*Machinimist* - Only interested in utilising the 3D engine to create a movie of their own (*Machinima*).

*Fictionist* - Interested in the story of the game rather than the way it is played

Reader - Interested in how the author of the game has used the environment and genre, in order to try and get inside the game authors' mind(s).

*Explorer* - interested in looking at the whole game, an "I wonder what's down here then?" approach.

Amateur Gamer - Interested in the whole game but being a novice may well only use one manoeuvre to get through the whole game and never unlocks the full potential of the game.

The model is complicated further by game players in massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) trying out and adopting different personae when playing the game. Evidence from interviews conducted with participants in MMOGs reveal that often players when they join a game conform to one particular type. Their participation in a MMOG is identified by a nickname (or "handle"), and expectation amongst peers is that a player bearing a particular handle will behave in a particular way. Sometimes players tire of this behaviour, and adopt another game playing style and associate this with a new handle. This illustrates that the game-playing type is by no means fixed, and it is tentatively suggested that certain games or genres inspire particular behaviours.

This categorisation of game players transcends age boundaries, since all types of players are found in all age brackets (although our evidence for this is anecdotal).

Now we have some identification of the types of player which may well attempt the game, how can we use this knowledge to further the analysis or design of a game?

## 5 Design and Analysis with a Model Gamer

In any field of endeavour in which sales is involved it pays to understand the customer's needs. The notion of the model gamer facilitates the design of games by considering the cultural background of the consumers when producing games. For example if a designer is developing a particular level or game, it is helpful to consider what the different model gamers will take from the experience.

When this model is applied to narratology it can bring fresh perspectives on the construction of narratives. For example any game played has an inherent social context, and as such game players are influenced by the peer groups in which they play and their previous experiences. Their style of play may vary across the models discussed, and this will influence the resultant narrative. This is out of the designer's control, and is often overlooked in the design process.

In addition enhancements to this model may well lead to the production of suitable or critical inclusion scenarios for the design process as well as a possible set of production heuristics and / or testing heuristic functions. For example work carried out by Desurvire et al [15] highlights the need for heuristics in the testing of game applications, however no mention of the style or desire of the player is utilised. The question then is to what extent are their heuristics or heuristic gameplay analysis affected by the style and model of those tested during game play scenarios.

For those of us interested in the analysis of computer games, it raises the possibility of constructing the model gamer for genres and instances thereof. Although as yet not a fully constructed model, this approach can yield benefits in both games analysis and design.

Further work is ongoing to consider what games attract what model gamers, and what factors influence transitions between the different models. In conclusion it is not possible to find the ideal gamer as a singular entity, but as a collective of different models. These models need to be validated (currently ongoing work) and that the work itself is difficult due to the organic nature of games, as new game genres emerge, they may result in the need for new models of game play and game players.

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