Has the X-Box 360 achievement system affected games usage?

When the X-Box 360 was released in November 2005, it introduced a number of new features to the world of console gaming and enhanced pre-existing ideas. Many of these features revolved around the concept of X-Box Live, originally introduced with the first X-Box but improved upon in the newer console. It made the console fully integrated with the internet enabling players to easily form multiplayer games amongst themselves as well as be able to communicate through the console. It also introduced the ability to download 'arcade' games, often old classics such as Pac-Man for a small fee, as well as new games exclusively made for the console. One of the most pivotal features of the X-Box Dashboard was that of the achievement system. This system provided an easy to read scoring system so that players could compare their achievements within games. The system works upon set guidelines set up by Microsoft. Each retail game offers up to 1000 points to be gained through achievements and each 'arcade' game offers 200 points. These points can be distributed in a series of different ways. Some games will divide points into eight or nine achievements while others spread them out into up to 50 different achievements. The difficulty to acquire each achievement can also change vastly. Some games will require a player to merely play the game through once to gain the full 1000 points while others require a player to play through the main plotline and then continue to complete all the sidequests. The advantage of this system can mean that players will do certain activities that they would not normally do, if there was no obvious benefit to accomplishing it, such as in the 'arcade' game Geometry War, where an achievement is gained for not firing for 60 seconds. There is also the somewhat more personalised system that it offers. It allows players to look at their friend's profile and see what games they mainly play and what achievements they aspire to which offers a lot more knowledge than merely looking at someone's games collection. [1] It also increases interaction amongst players from around the world with its wide range of profile options. Due to this achievement system it has a number of interesting connotations that would prove useful for analysis. As it is a very recent implementation, very little research has been conducted on the affects, if any, on players' game usage. This has meant a series of primary research has had to be carried out to ascertain players' current views on the system and to determine whether it has affected their playing habits. Obviously due to the time constraints involved, a relatively small group of players have been interviewed but this can form the basis to more detailed research once preliminary findings have been established.

The core to the debate regarding the affects of achievements lies with the player themselves. While many subtle features in games are ignored by seasoned players, the concept of achievements has sparked much debate across the internet amongst games players. The research conducted has primarily found positive reactions to the achievement system, however there are some interesting findings.

One participant (known as participant A) expressed feelings of slight inadequacy due to the system. They stated that they do 'like to use it to rank myself against others for particular games' but that other than that they felt behind their crowd of friends due to them having a much lower gamerscore than others on their friends list. They did

however suggest that this may be because they are a mostly casual gamer so do not have the time to 'outplay' their friends. Some other participants stated similar reservations, suggesting that this system may be better for players who play games a lot rather than just an hour or two a week. The more determined gamers seemed to find the achievement system affected their playing in a more positive way. Participant B had only had the console for around three weeks at the time of interviewing. They stated that originally they assumed a high gamerscore meant a particularly highly skilled games player. They have since discovered that a game score is more affected by the amount a person plays a game, and also what games they play. This leads onto standardisation problems which are discussed further on. He also stated that he had not really noticed what each achievement was for and felt that it was not crucially important to him; but did then state that this may change in the future. One participant, a player who has owned an X-Box 360 since its conception, stated that he felt the achievement system was one of the most useful additions to gaming in a long time. He felt that the idea of highlighting such achievements within a game helped encourage him to complete games fully. He did however feel that some points were worth 'less' and preferred achieving a large number of points in more difficult games, such as Dead Rising, feeling that they were more satisfying. The participant also found that it had changed his way of playing games, he stated that:

> '…before I traded in Top Spin 2 I played through and beat every character in exhibition matches to get 2 extra achievements, and even though I think King Kong sucks major ass (poor level design, bad gameplay mechanics, uninspiring gameplay and weapons), I'll still likely play through it to completion as I know doing so will give me 1000 points. There will be games that I just leave though…'

Finally he found himself renting games more than just buying games as it meant he could play through one game to completion to earn the points, and then just return it. This could indicate an interesting shift in the rental market but would require more economical analysis to determine if it has truly affected things.

One participant discussed the more negative aspects of the achievement system. They suggested that the large amount of online achievements in some games were unfair and structured towards players with a large amount of free time. Some games such as Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter and Gears of War require a player to obtain 10,000 kills in online games which would take a considerable amount of time. In the case of Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter, one achievement is for being number one in the world which would be near impossible for the vast majority of players, especially for those who bought the game late on its popularity lifespan.

Participant D expressed concerns over the addiction elements that the achievement system can bring. They described their experiences as almost feeling forced to play games to acquire more points rather than to play for the entertainment of games playing. They explained how some games such as UNO with its time consuming achievements, draw them in so that they feel compelled to 'master' the game due to its relatively simplicity to acquire more points. They did suggest that their quite competitive nature can affect the manner in which they play games, even admitting to buying games with easy achievements on them simply to boost their score quickly.

This participant's experience, as well as some others, highlights one of the main concerns with the achievement system which is the lack of standardisation. While some games such as Dead Rising evoke near Herculean efforts to 'max out' (achieve 1000/1000) the game, by forcing the player to play the game for around 14 hours non stop (the 7 day survivor achievement [2]); other games such as King Kong simply require the player to complete the fairly simple game to achieve the full number of points available, and even simply completing a chapter will unlock 100 points to the player. This can create a more subtle hierarchy, with rather than the points meaning less statistically, players comparing scores but not acknowledging achievements gained from games known to be simple to complete. One other factor which threatens the authenticity of gamerscores is the growth in websites which aid players in finding loopholes so that they can achieve set goals in a faster time than conventional methods would yield. [3] [4] In the case of online achievements, players join together to acquire the achievements with each other. This helps encourage social playing but could also be deemed as unfair due to players deliberately trying to get around the plans set out by the game designers.

Besides this primary research, secondary research conducted by people such as Salovaara et al. [5] This research looked at Multiplayer Game Communities such as MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) but can be extended to look at other gaming communities such as the X-Box Live community. The research looked at the motivation for playing such games. It suggested four key elements. Community Orientation which is to do with attachment to the community, wishing to aid other players; in the case of X-Box Live and its achievement system, this would be through aiding players on forums that help determine the easiest way to achieve certain tasks. [3][4] The second element is that of personal reputation, having a high gamerscore makes a player feel good about themselves as well as well respected amongst their fellow players: this is particularly important for players with scores of over 20,000 as it is quite a significant number to achieve. The third category: the effect on the environment is based on the importance of being able to aid in positive effects within the community: this could be connected to the community orientation such as helping a player achieve a goal, it can also be conducted through aiding in beta testing for some games. The final category is that of pure socialising, which is simply making new friends and enjoying playing a game with a social element rather than alone which has often been the case in the past. These four categories all seem to be the main things that motivate players to play online games, and much of the research produces similar results.

Game designers are also hit with further problems in their design, having to implement achievements throughout the game at set points to attempt to entice the gamer to continue to complete the game.

Designers have to ensure that the achievements, once implemented, are impossible to cheat so that the scores are nearest to accurate as possible. However this is not always so simple as so many gamers wish to find loopholes and tricks to 'cheat' the system and acquire points in an easier way, as previous websites show. [3] [4] In the case of a game such as Need for Speed: Most Wanted, games players have found ways to acquire easy 'bounty' which makes gaining achievements simpler. [6] They also have to deal with conflicts arising in online achievements. Most online achievements

require ranked matches to be played. Many gamers want to play ranked matches with their friends rather than random strangers, however this can mean players can 'fix' the matches to acquire achievements quicker. Having realised this, most games do not allow players to play ranked matches with friends, however this could be seen as unfair to players who merely want to play with their friends to gain the achievements, but in a fair manner. It is a difficult trade-off for the designers to determine. Game designers have also failed at times with careful planning of achievements, EA in particular have been criticised for making them too simple, such as in the case of the Madden 2007 where you can gain 5 points simply by loading up an option for mini games [7], which somewhat ruins the point of achievements being worthwhile.

The rush to gain so many achievements has also caused many negative connotations. The ability to cheat by trading gamesaves was a big problem until an X-Box Live update in Autumn 2006 disabled this function. [8] At this time some of the world's highest ranking players admitted using such features to cheat and gain more points. Microsoft took a stand and decided they did not want the system to be devalued anymore which is why it was implemented, but they do need to remain vigilant from other possible ways of getting around the system. Game designers have since implemented more complicated ways of saving, such as locking the game saves to a specific console through the use of ID tag embedding.

Perhaps one of the key factors regarding how the achievement system has affected games usage is through the issue of addiction. Many studies have been conducted on the idea of video game addiction, but the achievement system has not yet been singled out due to the fact it is so new. However, in the case of games journalists they have noticed the possible rise in obsession and addiction over achievements. Will Tuttle wrote an article in January 2006 stating that he felt addicted to achievements and that he felt himself stay awake late at night just to achieve one more set of points. [9] Although he brings this up in a humorous way it does raise some questions as to whether some players do actually feel trapped in an endless competition to achieve the most points. This could arguably be similar to that of MMORPG addiction whereby players spend huge amounts of time trying to have the best character on a World of Warcraft server for example. Research conducted with the earlier participants has shown that the majority of them do not feel addicted to the system, but that they can see how, as in many cases of addiction, if a person had an addictive personality they could find themselves drawn into it to an excessive degree. One participant did state that they thought a friend of theirs may possibly be addicted, or at least treating the games as more of an ambition than as entertainment. He described his friend's behaviour: that he plays mainly games that are simple to gain points in rather than any game such as Dead Rising which has particularly challenging achievements. The participant believes that in doing so that 'going solely for points would surely become a chore in the end.' It could be argued that these two people simply have different ideas about what constitutes as fun: one prefers to play games for the enjoyment while the other does so for the achievements. This may indicate a shift in the different reasons why people play such games.

Rob Cover of the University of Wellington has conducted some research into what he calls the 'myth' of video game addiction. [10] He suggests that any new concept is regarded as an addiction by people who do not fully understand it. In the case of achievements this may be true, and in the short term future the phenomenon may die

down. What the concept of achievements primarily needs is much more in-depth research to be conducted on the subject. The entirety of the X-Box Live Dashboard offers a huge amount of new features to the console world, including the achievement system and the ability to purchase games and, in the USA, films and television programs. [11] All these features could do with a large amount of research to be conducted on to evaluate usage as well as why people choose to play games just to gain achievement points, and if or why they download films and television programs to their console. It is arguable that these features are making the X-Box 360 more of a media centre than a games console, while still being able to offer a large range of gaming features. It is possible that only time can tell what will happen, whether people will compete for achievement points more or less than they are now. There is also the, as yet unexplored, topic of whether it is encouraging people to play games that they would not normally play, or whether it makes them do certain things that would not have normally occurred to them if it were not for the achievement system.

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