Playing Against the Game

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ABSTRACT

The paper first outlines a differentiation of play/game-motivations that include ‘negative’ attitudes against the play/game itself like cheating or spoil-sporting. This problem is of particular importance in concern of learning games because they are not ‘played’ for themselves – at least in the first place – but due to an instructional scheme. So they are likely to provoke resistance among the ‘players’ or learners. However, because they are introduced as a games, a certain extent a playful sphere is created. This opens the space for a previously neglected negative behaviour: ‘playing against the game’. The player – not so much the learner – creates a new game by ‘testing’ the game, by acting at specific points in contrast to the instructional scheme and/or the original idea or narrative of the game. Secondly, the paper will present empirical evidence concerning this phenomenon of ‘playing against the game’. The evidence comes from the evaluation of three different learning games. Student answers to usual motivational questions like: “The game was fun” – “I wanted to be better than the others” – “It was a good feeling to make strategic decisions”, will be compared to questions of resistance like: “I wanted to know what happens when my avatar was not doing well” – “I wanted to see what happens if I choose a bad strategy,” – “I wanted to know when the company goes bankrupt.” The data shows that – partly depending on complexity, playfulness and anonymity of the game – a relevant number of players/learners use this negative behaviour. Nevertheless, this behaviour can still be a way of interacting with the subject matter of the game.

KEYWORDS

Cheating, Educational Games, Game-Based Learning, Negativity in Playing, Play Motivation

INTRODUCTION

Together with a colleague (Remmele & Whitton, 2013) the author proposed to be more attentive to ‘negative behaviours’ in relation to playing – particularly when it comes to game-based learning. As the educational context generates a goal that is external to the intrinsic motivational basis of playing, behaviours that imply resistance against the game situation can be considered more likely than in mere gaming contexts. Such reactions can be rather destructive due to aggression against fellow players, like sabotage, or against the game itself, like spoil-sporting, but they can also be more constructive – in the sense that the learner creates a kind of new game by playing against the ‘original’ game. In this case the playfulness results from the uncertainty produced when a game structure disrupts. It can be understood as a specific ludic tension to test the limits of the given rules. Rules can be followed and subverted at the same time by making moves that are possible, yet do not follow the actual idea or narrative of the game. The approach can create a kind of fun and self-affirmation just to see what happens and how long one can go on.

However, in the context of educational games ‘playing against the game’ does not have to contradict the intended learning effect. If the game is well structured in respect of the field of learning, testing the limits of such a game can provide substantial learning opportunity.
Since the initial article the author has further developed this concept and conducted evaluations of educational games in the field of business and economics. The players/learners of three games were asked whether they had been playing against the pertinent game. Apart from usual motivational assessments like: “The game was fun” – “I wanted to be better than the others” – “It was a good feeling to make strategic decisions”, the school students – overall 12 to 18 years old – were also asked to rate statements like: “I wanted to know what happens when my avatar was not doing well” – “I wanted to see what happens if I choose a bad strategy.” – “I wanted to know when the company goes bankrupt.”

The following basic data analysis gives some plausibility to the phenomenon as such and to the role of certain game characteristics, such as playfulness, complexity and anonymity. Playing against the game seems to be more prevalent in games that are not playful as such. The complexity of games can allow for more tension concerning what happens if one is not fully committed to the original idea or narrative of the game. Anonymity, i.e. the level of control the teacher/game master can exercise, is also expected to moderate the manifestation of playing against the game.

NEGLIGENCE IN PLAYING AND GAME-BASED LEARNING

While in the literature the benefits of games for learning are implicitly related to socially acceptable or desirable behaviour (such as community-building and sharing), the implications of negative social motivations and behaviours (such as cheating, sabotaging or spoilsporting), both for learning and game play, receive less attention. However, these negative behaviours are commonplace, some being legitimate within the game structure (e.g. lying in Poker), while others take place outside of the ‘magic circle’ of the game. However, there is a growing body of research relating to violent motivations and the impacts of aggressive gaming (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Gentile & Gentile, 2007).

Accordingly analyses of the motivational basis of playing usually consider ‘positive’ forms; e.g. Malone and Lepper (1987) identified four internal motivations: challenge, curiosity, control and fantasy – and three interpersonal motivations: cooperation, competition and recognition. And classically, Caillois (1958) distinguishes agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx. Most of these forms are conceived as pro-social. Even competition and agon are at least not understood as anti-social. But when looking at more negative human traits we find them in the ludic sphere as well. Such negativity can be directed against other players as well as against the game itself.

We find satisfaction in destroying and sabotaging the performance or achievements of fellow players. Sabotage intended by the game designer is even a common game mechanic (for example in the board games Sabotage and traditional Ludo and all its derivatives) and is also used in educational gaming (e.g. Forsyth, Whitton & Whitton, 2011) to add tension and dynamics. Sabotage that is unintended by the game designer occurs when a player acts against the fun of the game not in order to win but to inflict damage on an opponent. The intentionality of the damage is likely to create anger. In this respect, it is only a marginal difference whether the sabotage is part of the game and increasing the thrill, like in Ludo, or a result of improper aggressive ‘playing’.

Schadenfreude is another given negative motivation. It is the pleasure in other people losing or suffering. Koster (2005, p. 92) lists schadenfreude as a gaming motivation, describing it as “the gloating feeling you get when a rival fails at something”. The main difference to sabotage is that for schadenfreude the occurring damage does not have to be inflicted intentionally – an occasional mistake or accident suffices. Nevertheless, showing schadenfreude demonstrates that one’s general solidarity with gaming partners and the idea of relatedness, which is fundamental for social games, is at least limited.
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