Categorizing Play Styles in Competitive Gaming

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the concept of play style, which has been insufficiently explored in research on video game players despite the diversity of empirically observable play styles in competitive gaming. The main proposition of this article is that play style is a pattern that predicts players’ behavior, their perceptions and their interactions. A qualitative analysis was conducted to better understand the term “style” in gamer culture based on an extensive examination of players’ texts and interviews with professional gamers and commentators. The results identify categories corresponding to seven general styles that relate to gamer terminology and play theory. The results also suggest a richness, dynamic interrelatedness and changeability of styles. Furthermore, there may be similarities among different play styles with regard to their activity components despite the different intentional patterns that direct players’ behaviors.

KEYWORDS

Intentional Pattern, Intentionality, League of Legends, Metagame, Play Form, Player Type, Professional Gamer, Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine and categorize play styles in competitive gaming. The play styles defined in the current literature are implicitly confused with player types and do not sufficiently connect theory and the rich productivity of gamer culture. Contemporary classifications produce schematic descriptions of categories (e.g., socializing or achieving) that are not comparable with the complex gamer terminology used by experienced or professional gamers (e.g., speedrunning or kiting). Based on this critique, this study aims to examine the concept and meaning of play style in competitive gaming. To achieve this goal, the general perspective of the online community and limited data on Czech professional gamers and commentators were employed.

The main motivation for examining this phenomenon is to further the understanding of players’ interaction in digital game environments. The modern trends of electronic sports and online multiplayer gaming enable researchers to study the complexity of human action and to speculate about the psychological processes that drive humans to act in strictly defined environments. The classification of play styles proposed in this study focuses on both of these aspects. This study aims to provide game designers, scholars, and other professionals with basic knowledge to recognize styles of play and how they determine players’ mutual perceptions and actions. The examination of competitive

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play styles can extend existing theory on the causes and means of players’ interaction and can bolster the discussion about terminological issues regarding “style” in game studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framing of this study draws from multiple approaches toward play styles, including psychology, game studies, philosophy of mind, and mathematical game theory.

Style in Game Studies

For more than two decades, digital games researchers have attempted to conceptualize play styles from several perspectives related to typologies. Game designers such as Richard Bartle (1996; 2003), Chris Bateman and Richard Boon (2006) have proposed models of player behavior to increase the entertainment quality of games. Psychologists (Bean & Groth-Marnat, 2016; Yee, 2006) have attempted to identify personal factors that contribute to different play styles to understand why playing has a motivational appeal for individuals. Play styles have also been of interest to marketing-oriented researchers (Tseng, 2011; Tuunane & Hamari, 2012), educators (Heeter, 2008) and gender specialists (Lucas & Sherry, 2004). However, few studies examine players’ understanding and use of play styles in gaming (e.g., Kallio, Mäyrä, & Kaipainen, 2011).

The above-mentioned player typologies have many strengths. For example, descriptions of large groups can be easier to operationalize and can represent abstract qualities in prototypical individuals. However, researchers have identified the following issues with the current typologies:

- The categories are often too rigid and should be more flexible and non-exclusive (Bateman, Lowenhaupt, & Nacke, 2011; Crawford, 2012; Dixon, 2011);
- Some game genres, such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and online games are more frequently researched than others (Kahn et al., 2015; Kallio et al., 2011; Tuunane & Hamari, 2012);
- Some categories of players have not been empirically validated (Kahn et al., 2015; Yee, 2006);
- The typologies are often based on self-report methods that might be biased (Crawford, 2012).

Studies can also be criticized for other issues. First and most notably, researchers rarely distinguish between style and type. Implicit definitions result in difficulties because it is unclear whether the research subjects are consistent across studies. Thus, problems have emerged regarding the definition of style. Several authors believe that play style is a characteristic pattern that is attributed to a type (Jackson, Gauntlett, & Steemers, 2008; Kallio et al., 2011). Some researchers use play style and player type almost synonymously (Bartle, 1996; Bateman & Boon, 2006; Stewart, 2011) or attempt to reduce style to motivation or personality type (Bateman et al., 2011; Yee, 2006). These approaches are useful for specific research purposes but do not explicitly differentiate between concepts. General psychological knowledge suggests that types classify groups of people based on one or more stable and common characteristics, such as motivation or personality traits, whereas style primarily reflects how an individual performs an activity and places less importance on who the person is or why she or he does it. In contrast with type, style is more flexible and individual. It
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