

WHO IS THE USER NOW?

Gamers, Non-Gamers and their Usability Requirements

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Abstract. Focus group research into the usability requirements of casual game users.

1. Introduction

The Games@Large project, a multi-national network funded by the European Commission under FP6, developing a new platform for delivering interactive rich media applications, such as computer and video games, in a low-cost environment and aimed that those users who do not typically play computer or video games. As part of this project, we have been investigating the drivers and barriers to digital gaming as experienced by casual and very casual game users – that is, those users who do not engage with computer and video games, or do so only very occasionally. The initial phase of this research, conducted via focus groups with mixed groups of game and non-game users, uncovered a range of usability requirements for non-game users that differ from those of more frequent or committed game users. Drawing upon evidence gathered from these focus groups, this paper will argue that the design imperatives for a game platform aimed at casual or very casual game users must address their specific usability requirements in order to be successful.

2. Method

A series of seven focus groups, with 6 to 8 participants in each, were conducted over July 2007, around the theme of 'Drivers and Barriers to Digital Game Use'. The focus group respondents were divided primarily by age cohort, with the youngest age cohort (18-25 years) being further divided by gender, and the middle age cohort (35-54 years) sub-divided by the presence of children within the family home. This categorization was made on the basis of an earlier literature review, which had indicated that the digital play preferences of younger adults were more highly determined by gender, while the play preferences of older adults were more likely to be determined by the presence of children in the family home (Jung von Matt, 2006). The three remaining groups (26-34 years, 55-64 years and 65 years of age and older) were not differentiated by gender or by the presence of children in the home. All seven groups had a minimum of 3 game users and 3 non-game users, and attempts were made to recruit respondents from across a range of socio-economic groups.

The focus groups were run as guided conversations, in which respondents were asked initially about their experiences in playing any game, broadly defined, and the features of these games that they liked and disliked. They were then probed more directly on their knowledge of and experiences in playing computer and video games, and on the factors that lead them to play these games or which had acted as barriers to their play. Finally, specific questions relating to the business models of computer and video games, and the ways in which these models might facilitate or discourage future play were posed, and respondents probed for their reactions and opinions.

3. Findings

Although the focus groups were aimed at game users as well as non-game users, the purposes of the research was to determine the usability requirements of non-gamers and very casual game users, to determine the barriers which prevented them from playing, and to identify any drivers that would facilitate greater use of computer and video games by these users.

Four main themes emerged around casual and non-game users, and their usability requirements; these were questions of accessibility, ease of engagement and use, rapid engagement, appliance-like operation and ready access to play.

3.1 ACCESSIBILITY

These factors were often identified by respondents by way of contrast to the perceived needs of more frequent game users: on the question of the design of the games controller and its accessibility, one female respondent from the 25-34 yr group said

"a normal handheld controller with lots of buttons and combinations to press is something that I find quite alienating".

The question of the gamepad game controller, and the degree to which it rendered game play less accessible, was a recurring theme among the five groups who had experience with computer and video games. A male respondent in the 35-54, no children at home group stated that

"People my sort of age, y'know games are too difficult for them anyway. Unless you stay with it ... cos you don't know what you're doing, too many buttons to press".

Later in this same group, another respondent offered the suggestion, met with enthusiastic agreement by the others in the group, that games designed with a simpler controller and which were more accessible would be extremely popular:

"I mean if you've got like on your remote control and it's got like a basic cursor, up, down, left, right, and the games are like designed, like, a simple format people will play them on a set top box all day long.

The inaccessibility of the game controller, and the need to have sufficient skill to control the game prior to playing it, was a recurring explanation from non-game users as to why they did not play:

"You need to know, or you need to have like read about it for example or to have read the instructions and be quite familiar with that or watched other people playing it before you can have a go - I don't know, to me it seemed quite alienating I suppose."

The speaker here was a female respondent from the 25-34 age group; another respondent, from the female 18-24 group reinforced the importance of accessibility as a design imperative for very casual game users:

"when I have seen them or been in contact with [games] it's been my friends playing things I'm not particularly interested in. And if I played I'd get the things and just be like shh shh shh [makes button-mashing motion] and, like, I don't know what I'm doing."

It is worth noting that not every respondent felt this way; notably, amongst the game users the difficulty – or at least the complexity - of the interface was one of the advantages of the gamepad game controller. When probed about the possibility of simple games being delivered via set-top boxes, one of the respondents in the male 18-24 group, a self-identified game user, commented that:

"The problem you might find, what I'd question would be the tool you'd use for actually these games ... Cos I wouldn't want to just play with a joystick with a one button on it or something. I appreciate it's cheap but sometimes it's worth paying money for a good bit of kit."

3.2 EASE OF ENGAGEMENT AND USE

The question of accessibility was not limited to simply controller design, however: the more casual users also described the ways in which steep learning curves for some computer and video games acted as a barrier to their participation. One very casual game user in the 25-34 group, when probed as to what sort of games she might like to play, replied that she was interested in "simple" games, "basic ones":

"...something that doesn't require a lot of instructions or that's quite intuitive, obvious, as it were".

When asked to describe the circumstances under which she might play a computer or video game, this same respondent replied

"If I went round to somebody's house and they were playing something, then I probably would want to get involved, especially if I was kind of given some sort of tuition."

The steep learning curve that was seen to be associated with contemporary computer and video games came up as a theme in the 35-54 no children group as well. Two male respondents from this group had the following exchange

"As long as it's got a basic format to it, not hard work - adults will play it, y'know what I mean. ...People ain't got time to start getting complicated on games like that"

"And a lot of them are too complicated."

This theme of accessibility of the game recurred several times in this group as a reason for why they weren't playing as many games as they used to, and weren't especially interested in playing them,

"Nowadays they're [games] a bit more concentrated. You have to remember...you have to sort of go through it for ages to get to each level."

"It's too sophisticated and that".

Another respondent in this group, when asked what sort of games she would be interested in playing, expressed the view that "Yeah if there're simple I would". When asked as a group which games they might be interested in playing, one male respondent declared that he was interested in playing older games: "Definitely, yeah, a lot simpler", to which there was widespread agreement among the focus group.

Finally, games which took too long to pay were seen as barriers to engagement, in contrast to the wishes of more regular game users, for which longer play potential was a driver, not barrier, to uptake. One respondent in the male 18-24 group, stated this the most succinctly

With me, as well as more social games, also shorter games. Cos when I was like younger, I would play any game that looked half-way interesting but now I'm not gonna-well apart from Oblivion- I'm not gonna play a game which is gonna take a really big time commitment to get anywhere cos I just don't want to give that much time to it.

3.3 RAPID ENGAGEMENT

Closely related to the question of engagement and use of computer and video games for these users, was the question of the speed with which this engagement occurs. Among the male 18-24 group there was an understanding that any game delivered via a set-top box would need to improve on current offerings. When probed about the current barriers to play exhibited by these games, they gave the following response

"they're too slow ... it takes about half an hour to load...it's just like - could be doing something else. That's Sky, yeah."

"It's quite hard to go from playing something that plays faster than normal computer games to, like, really having to press every button with decisive intent just to get the character to move one step to the left, it's annoying"

In contrast, when probed as to which games they would like to play, this group had a strong preference for games that were quick to load, such as flash or browser-based games:

"Yeah, flash games quite a lot. Cos y'know at our house we've got a laptop or two and it's always quite good fun if someone's just sitting on the couch and they are a bit bored and they find this new sort of flash game where you have to baseball bat a penguin as far as possible or something like that."

In a similar vein, when asked about which games she preferred to play, one respondent from the female 19-24 group described who she used to play games on her mobile phone and why she no longer does.

"I think I used to play the games on my phone when they were simplest ... I need something I can just look at and play and now know to do it straight away. So I think the games before were much simpler."

3.4 APPLIANCE-LIKE OPERATION

In conjunction with the need for games to be easy to start playing was an understanding that games and game platforms needed to be simple and transparent to use, and that casual and very casual users not be required to know any special knowledge in order to get the game working. As one of the respondents in the male 18-24 group stated, game use was an incidental thing that he did in between more important moments of his life:

"I don't know about you lot but you don't plan gaming into your, like, daily routine. It's like when you are bored or tired or something like that."

For this respondent, the operation of the game device can't impose itself upon his lifestyle – he is not playing a game because of the game or the platform; he is playing in order to fill in a gap in his life prior to doing something that had more meaning to him. Another respondent in the same group made the observation, when describing what a good game was for him, that

"I think the best games aren't necessarily the games that take up a massive time commitment, not like an RPG where you're gonna get addicted to it or want to spend every second of your life playing it, but like a game that you can get somewhere or whatever in a short amount of time but it still has a lot of lastability to it."

A respondent in the 35-54 no children group made a very similar point: that he would be interested in a gaming platform if it allowed him to occupy some time that couldn't be productively used doing something else.

"I wouldn't have no qualms, I think it would be a good idea. It does pass the time waiting for my mates to turn up – there's nothing coming on the TV, turn on the TV, they're on there, play that for half an hour."

This point was echoed by a respondent in the female 18-24 group. The only self-identified active gamer in this group, she stated that she and her friends help *SingStar* karaoke parties. Even for this respondent, the purpose

of playing the game was not the game itself, but for the social interactions it enabled.

"But you kind of combine it - I wouldn't sit and play cards for two hours - if there's like a group of us then we'll generally combine it with alcohol which usually makes it last longer. Same with SingStar and stuff - and Buzz - it's a very social thing. So you might spend a few hours doing it but you're not gonna be sat there doing exactly the same thing for that long."

None of these respondents are looking to engage with their games or gaming platforms as a challenge or reward in themselves - in all cases, the game play facilitates another outcome which is meaningful for the user. These outcomes - the time spent with friends, the time passed until friends arrive, the time out when one is busy or tired - are made possible by the game or game platform; however, none of them are directly related to the game or the platform. For these casual and very casual game users, their engagement is not with the gaming platform itself, but only with the gaming platform insofar as it enables them to further a given life situation that is meaningful to them.

Unlike the committed game user, for whom the engagement with the device may well be one of the rewards of computer game play; for the casual or non-user, the point of game play is to enable other outcomes which have meaning to them. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the 55-64 group - these respondents were all firmly of the belief that game play had no role in their lives; however all of them had both played and purchased computer or video games at least once. For this group, computer and video games were a means by which they could have interactions with and spend time with their grandchildren - the game and the game platform were entirely subsumed within the interactions with the family members.

4. Conclusions

The focus groups we conducted into barriers and drivers of digital game use revealed a number of usability requirements specific to casual and very casual game users. For these users to engage with a gaming device, it needs to be accessible, with a low learning curve and with a controller device that is more intuitive to use than a gamepad. The device, and the games playable on it have to be easy to use and to engage with; not requiring large commitments of time or energy in order to learn how the games work or the platforms operate. Casual and very casual game users require that any gaming platform have a rapid engagement process - the process of launching the game has to be fast and seamless, such as the experience of browser based games and

games delivered seamlessly via set-top boxes. Fourthly, the gaming device must operate like an appliance for the user, performing its task without notice such that the user can achieve the goal they seek. The casual and very casual game user is not interested in playing a game: he or she is interested in achieving something else which, at a specific point in time, can best be achieved by playing a computer or video game. Designing a game platform that meets these usability requirements would go a long way towards turning these casual and very casual game users into more regular gamers.

References

Jung von Matt, EA GmbH and GEE: 2006, *Spielplatz Deutschland: Eine Typologie der Computer- und Videospiele*, [online] <http://www.spielplatz-deutschland.de/> (accessed October 9, 2007).