An Exploratory Study on the Reasons and Preferences of Six Malaysian Students on the Video Games Played

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the reasons why six Malaysian students from upper secondary school are playing video games, types of games and the features preferred. A qualitative method was being used in the study. Purposive sampling was conducted in selecting the students. The findings indicated that students played video games for a great range of reasons. Different students play for different reasons. Some shared common reasons and preferences. A few findings were very specific and never mentioned before in previous researches. However, more research needs to be undertaken in order to address the diversity of students with a bigger sample and different methodology.

Key words: Qualitative Method, Video Games, Types of Video Games, Reasons of Playing, Features Preferred

INTRODUCTION

Funk, Buchman, Jenks and Becholdt (2003) pointed out that interactive media, such as video and computer games, have redefined children's leisure activities. Many popular games contain violence components. Therefore, there has been an increasing studies focusing on the potential negative effects of electronic interactive games on children and adolescents (Anderson, Funk & Griffiths, 2004). Olson et. al. (2007) reported that one third of the boys being studied played games nearly every day while one in eight boys played 15 hours or more per week. The researcher team alleged that boys who rarely or never play video games are unusual since it is often a social activity for boys. For the purpose of this study, video games was defined as games played on game platforms such as Sony Playstation series (X, 2 or 3), the Nintendo Game Cube, the Xbox by Microsoft or on personal computers.

Yee (2006) did a research by collecting data from 3000 Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) players through online surveys publicized at online portals. A factor analytic approach was used to create an empirical model of player motivations. The analysis revealed 10 motivation subcomponents that grouped into three main components which are achievement, social and immersion. This empirical model of player motivations in online games provides the foundation to understanding and assessing how players differ from one another and how motivations of play relate to age, gender, usage patterns and behaviours. It showed that the same video game may have different meanings or consequences for different players.

Different people choose to play games for very different reasons.

A survey done by Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2001) produced four main reasons for playing games. 85 percent of frequent computer and video game players contributed it to having fun. It was followed by challenging factors of the games, interactive social experience provided by the games and a huge return of entertainment value for the money. However, the survey failed to show clear consensus on the reasons why people playing digital games. Kirriemuir and McFarlane (2004) commented that it could be due to the games themselves as games vary enormously. Besides that, the individuality characteristic of players also provides a complex set of reasons for playing games.

Purpose

The main goal of this study is to understand the reasons why Malaysian students are playing video games and their preferences. It is an attempt to understand the lure of video games. The rationale of the study is for the educators, parents, administrators and policy makers to understand the appeals of the students, in order to tune to their needs, by incorporating good video games into learning process. Most reported studies are foreign based, mainly from developed western countries. What is lacking here is local study that addresses the following questions such as what and why Malaysian students are playing video games? What features of commercial video games could be manipulated while developing educational games? The identification of the games' features that are appealing could help game designers to develop educational games that tailor to local students' needs.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Research design

A qualitative method was being used for this study. Purposive sampling was conducted to select participants who have been playing video games for more than a year in whatever platforms available. Six students were selected based on the diverse academic performance and family economic status in order to provide a wider level of students' representation. In this study, there was only one setting where all the participants came from the same school in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. This design setting is supported by statements from Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen (2006, pp.472), Taylor & Bogdan (1998, pp.78) and Glaser & Strauss (1967). Ary. et. al. (2006) explained that the purposive sample selected in qualitative methodology is typically small but believed to be sufficient in providing maximum insight and understanding of what is being study. There are always more people and places to study. Actual number of cases being studied is relatively unimportant (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is also supported by statements from Taylor & Bogdan (1998) where they mentioned that many excellent studies have been conducted based on a single setting. They stressed that no matter how many settings are being studied, the most important thing at the end of the day is the ability to develop an understanding of something that was not understood before.

Subjects

Initially, subjects were chosen based on gender, age and with the criteria of playing video games at least an hour a week. All the students were from upper secondary school level and aged between 16 and 17 years old. The main reason for choosing this age group was because their activities are less subject due to adult oversight than those of younger children. There were three males and three females. Further, the students were divided into three groups based on their form three (grade nine) national assessment, Penilaian Menengah Rendah's (PMR) results.

Instrumentation

Interviews were carried out to garner information. The justifications on why interviews were done are because the researcher wanted to get the rich information from the first persons views, which were the students' themselves. Besides that, lots of research had been done based on the analysis of the second or third person's views and observations. Further, interviews allow students to express their feelings, opinions, views, experience and thoughts. At the same time, it had allowed the researcher for an immediate follow-up and clarified the students' responses. Thus, it provides an opportunity for an in-depth understanding of the current scenarios and generates a range of information with a different quality compare with traditional approaches.

Data Collection

Data was collected using audio tape recorder. This was based on the suggestion by Ary et. al. (2006, pp.481). Ary et. al. (2006) suggested that the most efficient way to collect interview data is by using audio tape recorder as it is much less distracting than taking notes and it also provides a verbatim record of the responses. Data was also collected through further telephone chat in order to collect additional data that could shed some lights on the themes created and to clarify some statements.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in relation to the purpose of the study. Comparative method was being used in data analysis. Dick (2005) pointed out that constant comparison is the heart of the process in qualitative research. Comparisons were made between interviews and once categories and concepts emerged, data were being compared to theories and concepts.

Validity and Reliability

The validity of findings was assured through students' validation of draft reports and process of comparing and contrasting across cases being studied. The purposes of study were being explained before interviews and all the students participated in this study were on voluntary basis. The possibility of students not exposing full and accurate information was overcame with few similar questions to counter check with the reliability and validity of the information given. The reliability of the findings was also strengthened by some common similarity of students' answers to the literature on the related area.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The male students were named with anonym as Alex, Bob and Calvin while the female students were named as Amy, Betty and Carol. Alex and Betty were from low income group while Bob and Carol were from average income group. Calvin and Amy represented the better income group. In term of academic performance, Calvin and Carol were categorized as good achievers based on the grade nine national examinations in Malaysia. Amy and Alex represented the average student group while Bob and Betty were from the weaker group, in term of academic performance.

i. Why are Malaysian students playing video games?

First and foremost, all the participants agreed that they were influenced by friends and/or their own siblings. As for Alex, he said that the more friends playing, the merrier the environment is. He even encouraged his younger brothers to play video games. However, although Carol was introduced into video games by her own brother, she gave the opposite perceptions. She said that she would never recommend video games to any of her friends because it has no

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morale values in it. As for Amy, her grandmother played an important role in recommending her into playing video games through Sony Playstation 2. Her grandmother was trying to attract her grandchildren to visit her regularly through video games.

Secondly, five out of the six participants play video games in order to release stress and tension that either caused by school, friends or family. Carol said her parents expected a perfect score of straight As for her PMR examination. It's a big pressure for her and she reduced it through playing video games. As for Betty, it's more related to problems within her family. School friends were making life uncomfortable for Calvin. He even described school's life as not attractive, no fun and not interesting at all. Stress and tension for Bob and Alex came from the inability to progress well in their studies. Alex said, to make thing worse, some teachers did not entertain his questions. Some teachers were being so "quiet" and they didn't bother to know whether the students understood. Such teachers didn't contribute to his psychological needs. Therefore, these students were finding comfort through video games. Reuters (2007) reported that new research shown that playing video games can satisfy deep psychological needs and, at least in the short term, improve people's well being. Meanwhile, the infinite patience feature of games and simulations is valuable for learning. Teachers lose patience, and may conclude that a student "just isn't cut out for an A". The teacher's impatience may intimidate a learner or influence how the learner perceives himself or herself. Machines such as computers and video games don't lose patience, and offer learners innumerable opportunities to "just try and try it again" (Federation of American Scientists, 2006).

Thirdly, school teachers should take note of the following reason why students are playing video games. Half of the participants interviewed given the reason of too much time available since they didn't have much homework to do after school. In order to pass the time and having fun at the same time, they choose to play video games. Why video games and not something more meaningful such as reading? This contributes to the fourth reason which is because video games have attractive graphics and interactive feature. With the advance of video technology, the video games' graphics are in three dimensions and it gives a real and detail looks properties. Calvin was quoted as saying, "Playing video games is just like reading a story book full of graphics. For example, story with full graphics about one of the world's wonders, The Hanging Garden of Babylon in Rome Total War 2." Those were the common points shared between the participants.

However, each of the participants has their very own reasons of attracting to video games too. The fifth reason, according to Alex was the carrots offered by cyber cafes. Cyber cafes had their own attraction, where the more he played, the cheaper he paid. Since Alex is from low income group and he doesn't own a computer at home, he has to rely on the service provided by the cyber cafes. The feeling of belonging to a group of friends was the sixth reason keeping him playing more strategically in order to lead the group.

For him, friends are important in his life because they motivate him. Friends will ask him for advises on how to complete certain level of games. It made him feels important. This was totally different in the classroom. In the classroom, he felt lost and unimportant. Since he wasn't doing well academically, the only way that could boast his self-confidence and the feeling of being appreciated was through games.

Alex had another reason of playing video games which was totally different from other participants. He said he played video games because it gives him a chance to earn money. He can sell off his weapon's power to other players. So far, he had earned RM150 from selling his weapon's power. Perhaps one day he will join the professional gamers. The Star (13 March 2007) reported that certain cyber cafes sponsor gamers by providing accommodation and paying monthly salary to potential gamers. In return, they will participant in local and international tournaments to win as many games as possible. For example, Team Hybrid has won a total of RM265,000 from major tournaments.

As for Calvin, he plays video games because it gives him the feeling of being an important person especially when he played a role in controlling a country in Rome Total War 2. The game that applied artificial intelligence feature could make him think, decide and control. He could see the outcomes of his actions and decisions. It never gives him satisfaction because the more he plays; the more he doesn't feel satisfy. He always hopes to reach a better level each time he plays. Researchers argued that mastering challenges in video games can be a healthy way of coping when opportunities for feeling independent or competent are scarce in the real world (Reuters, 2007). Therefore, video games in some ways are very good at satisfying these psychological needs.

Betty chooses to play video games especially violence games because she doesn't want to be categorized as a weaker group, just like any other girls. Playing video games makes her feels different. Meanwhile, Carol plays online video games in order to meet international virtual friends. She wants to understand more about other's cultures and lifestyles. Her parents intended to send her overseas to further study after form five. By understanding the cultures of others is an early self preparation to go overseas. Besides that, she thinks that it's interesting and thrilling to be able to kill, snatch and do other actions that could hold one's breathe. She will never be able to do such things in real life.

Olson et. al. (2007) listed 17 possible reasons children playing games on the instrument used for the research to compare game play patterns of young adolescent boys and girls. The reasons for playing video games as listed by Olson et. al. (2007) were:

It's just fun.
It's exciting.
Something to do when bored.
Challenge of figuring things out.
To compete and win.
Helps me relax.
Nothing else to do.

Like guns and weapons.
Create my own world.
Learn new things.
To forget problems.
To get my anger out.
I like to 'mod' games.
My friends like to play.
Teach others how to play.
Feel less lonely.
Make new friends.

Base on the findings of my study, I would like to suggest for eight additional reasons to be added into the survey for future research:

Attraction from cyber cafes.
Feeling of belonging to a group of friends.
It's like reading a story book full of graphics.
Recommendation from friends, siblings or relatives.
Trying to prove the ability to achiever certain target.
A new age source of income.
Self-satisfaction.
Not to be left out and perceived by others as the weaker gender.

ii. Types of video games played and preferred

Due to a general lack of commonly agreed-upon genres or criteria for the definition of genres, classification of games are not always consistent or systematic. Many of the categories overlap due to the subjective nature of the genres (Wikipedia$_3$, 2007). Therefore, in this study, types of games played by the students are hard to be categorized because of the shared properties. The six students played various types of games. However, I will discuss according to the favourite games transcribed from the interviews of each students. It appears that the same type of video game may have different meanings or consequences for different students. Different student choose to play games for very different reasons.

Alex loves to play action games such as killing monsters and humans. His favourite is Risk Your Life 2, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The game provides an online virtual reality atmosphere that is interactive and immersive. Millions of players around the globe are attached to video gaming simply because it offers such unprecedented ability to interact with large numbers of people engaged simultaneously in a structured environment where they are all involved in the same activity (Wikipedia$_1$, 2007). In Risk Your Life 2, there are a lot of creatures to be killed and quite a few areas to explore. Alex has the opportunity to create his own character, define his role and do battle with it. Besides that, he claimed that the attractive 3D environment graphics and the sound made him suspense all the time. What motivates him to play without feeling bored is the action of killing creatures. The more he kills, the more powerful he is. In the game, there are a huge number of armours, accessories, items that can be purchased or looted from enemies.

He started playing by investing RM38 in purchasing weapon. However, as he got more powerful, he sold his weapon's power to other player before and earned about RM150. That motivates him even more. He thinks he could make money by playing games. In fact, in South Korea, professional gamers attract huge sums in sponsorship and can make more than $100,000 a year (BBC News, 10 August 2005).

Of all the students interviewed, Bob was the only one who had played before the games that are categorized as adult's game or x-rated. He started playing adult's game when he was in form three (grade nine) but now, he has stopped. This was because his mother will hit him with whatever she could reach once she caught him playing such games. In order not to make his mother hit him or unhappy, he stops playing adult's game. Now, he prefers shooting games and role playing of police and criminal. His favourite game at the moment is Counter Strike – Condition Zero. It is a tactical action game that challenges player to compete with and against cunning computerized opponents in a Tour of Duty across the globe. Bob was attracted to this game due to the highly-detailed graphics and the never seen before elements such as special effects and simulations in the game. The ability to shoot others and being shot make him excited. Besides that, he is able to carry out role playing such as rescue hostages, escort VIPs to safety and defuse bombs.

Calvin's favourite is Rome Total War 2, a strategy game. He likes the game because it gives him a total control of resources and situations. The graphics of the game captured his attention. It looks so real and in great detail. He feels like he is 'in the game' and playing for real. According to Calvin, the game allows him to lead his own armies across battlefields. He is conquering the world through the actions of resource gathering, base building and army crushing. He said he feels so important when he can participate in gigantic real-time battles where thousands of soldiers fight and die for him. Only video games could give him such satisfaction. There is no way he can do it in real life.

The girls were playing almost the same kind of games as the boys such as strategy, fighting, shooting and multi-player online games, except for Amy. In general, most students interviewed like to have some violence features in the games because that would thrill them more. However, Amy was the only students interviewed who does not like to play violence game. She was the typical girl gamer. Games that she likes to play are such as sports, musical and casual games. Her favourite is Happy Feet, based on the popular film's title, and is being played through PS2. She loves the game because of the cute penguins, the motivating factors that encourage her to try again and again, the music and the dance movements made by the characters are great and entertaining.

Betty loves playing violence games in order to be different from others. She claimed that she doesn't want to be categorized as the weaker group. She could do whatever the boys are doing. Nielsen Active Game study conducted on 2000 players from United States found that a small hardcore group of young females are

playing aggressive games that are usually thought of as being 'traditionally male' games (Wikipedia₁, 2007). Betty might be the special case that represented some of our young Malaysian girls who play aggressive games.

Carol's favourite game is Grand Theft Auto 3. Her parents were against it because they alleged that the game was extremely violence. Certainly, this game was not designed with children on mind. However, since both her parents are working, she managed to play for three months without her parents' noticed it. She has stopped playing it now. However, Carol said if given a choice she would like to keep playing. She claimed until now, there is no games that could replace Grand Theft Auto 3 as her favourite. Grand Theft Auto 3 is a role playing game (RPG). It allows the players to perform a lot of actions within the game. To mention just a few, players can hit and kill people, carjack and drive an enormous variety of vehicles, use several cool weapons, be a taxi driver, repair and paint the car, have sex with prostitutes and burn people alive. Can anyone just imagine how a timid girl like Carol was playing Grand Theft Auto 3? But that's reality. Carol likes the game because it gave her the feeling of in control of everything and the graphics look real. In real life, she is being controlled by her parents and teachers most of the time. She is an obedient type of girl and behaves accordingly to what the majority in the society expected a child to be. Playing Grand Theft Auto 3 is one of the ways to break free, feel the freedom in life and in control of everything. According to Carol, she is granted with freedom to explore and freedom to experience with Grand Theft Auto 3.

All the six participants said they played educational video games before, but not anything related with their school's curriculum content. Alex gave the example of O 2 Jam game, which helps him applying the left and right brain simultaneously, enriching his EQ and learning music notes. Bob played Titanic: The Hidden Expedition, where he needed to look for words to describe the furniture or properties found in the game. However, he is not playing anymore because he finds it boring as he is weak in vocabulary and he couldn't progress well in the game. Bob said it doesn't matter what have he gained from the video games. What matter most is whether he enjoyed it or not. Calvin plays Rome Total War 2, which contains some history facts. He has been playing since last year and never gets bored of it.

As for the girls, Amy and Carol played educational video games before, which were the level of elementary school. They never have seen any games that contain the learning content of secondary school level. Betty played before games that related with language, general knowledge and history. However, she claimed that she can't really understand what's the knowledge being imparted in the games. She had forgotten everything including the title of the games soon after playing. Betty said it's just like reading a book, "read and forget." As for Carol, the educational video games she played came together with the Japanese and French courseware. It's a very basic level learning of number, words and time. Carol is not very keen of learning from video games.

She prefers to read a book rather than playing video games that embedded with educational values because she perceived that playing video games need longer time to achieve certain objectives. She assmed it's faster to get to know what she needs to know through books.

iii. The preferred features of video games

Below is a listing of features preferred by the six students interviewed for the reference of any potential educational video games developers:

i. Action games that allow players to perform lots of actions, decisions and control such as killing monsters, creatures, human beings or playing the role of police and criminal. These are preferred by the five participants except Amy. Elliot, Adam and Buckman (2002) discovered that the hypotheses that attitudes about Mathematics, spatial ability and interest in video games would correlate with both interest in and achievement with math-learning environment proved to be false. One of the reasons was because their lacked of actions and couldn't compete against commercial video games.

ii. Assortment of weapons are something expected by the five students who love to play violence games. Violence games satisfy the students' needs to feel powerful and in control.

iii. Three dimensional graphics which look real and in details.

iv. A good sound effects could trill the players.

v. Does not involve too much learning content. According to Betty, too much learning content will make her stuck in the game and lost interest. She prefers games that do not need too much of the thinking skill. As for Carol, games should be something light and entertaining.

vi. Calvin suggested something more mature and not games such as Mario and Pokemon which are very childish. It contradicted with Amy and Betty. They prefer cute characters because it will add the entertaining value into the games.

v. Students interviewed preferred to be in control of the characters and situations. Discovery learning is an approach to instruction through which students interact with their environment by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies or performing tasks. Ormrod (1995, pp.442) stressed that the idea of discovery learning contributes to the situation where students are more likely to remember concepts they discovered on their own.

vii. Interesting and thrilling. The feature listed by the participants is congruence with the theory of cognitive by Jerome Bruner which stated that interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning, rather than external goals such as grades (Smith, 2002).

viii. Interactive. According to the study carried of by Nielsen Active Game study (Wikipedia₁, 2007), females were being significantly attracted to playing certain online multi-user video games that offered a more communal experience. However in this study,

males showed interest in communicating with other online players, as much as the females.

    ix. Task that provides immediate feedback.

    x. Provides the value of entertaining, where players are able to lose awareness of worry and frustration of daily's activities.

    xi. Hard enough but doable in order to create the challenging feature. Bob prefers games that are easy to understand and play without referring much to the instructions. This contradicted with Calvin. Calvin prefers games that are interactive and informative, with lots of description, knowledge imparted and guidance throughout the games. In cognitive science, this is referred to the regime of competence principle, which results in a feeling of simultaneous pleasure and frustration (Gee, 2003).

CONCLUSION

    Although this study was of a short duration due to the constraints of time and situation, it did provide a glimpse into the reasons students playing video games, types and features of games they preferred, thus contributing to the understanding of the needs and preferences of the local contemporary youths in this digital era. It appears that all the students interviewed mentioned about the use of video games in soothing some part of their emotional aspects. Therefore, the use of video games as an emotional regulator deserves further study. The findings also suggested that parents should play an important role in guiding their kids on the exposure to inappropriate content which opposed to the eastern cultures. Perhaps for future research, observations on students' playing video games at their own settings and time will fill the vacuums in the information presented in this study. It will take a longer period making appointments and waiting for the students to play video games at their own settings, moods and conveniences. Finally, caution is warranted in the interpretation of the findings of this study, because children's game choices, preferences and play patterns evolve as they mature.

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