Understanding Gamers’ Experience of Engaging in a CyberFusion LAN Party

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Abstract. This paper describes the findings of the research concentrating on gamers’ experience of playing digital games at a LAN (Local Area Network) party. The objective of the study was to understand the gamers’ motives of gaming in a LAN party and to investigate the immersive experience of gamers while playing games. The data were gathered through our observation and survey instrument. The survey among thirty LAN gamers shows that this cohort of exclusively male gamers were motivated mainly by social (M=4.45) and interest (M=4.03) intentions. Furthermore, the gamers tended to have high immersive experiences (M=130.86) during the event.

Keywords. Digital games, Engagement, Gamers, User Experience.

1 Introduction

To date, LAN (Local Area Network) party is popular despite the increasing number of gamers who have high-speed access to the Internet at home. Fast connections at home facilitate global online gaming, thus enabling individual gamers to participate in a gaming community, or LAN party. According to Janz and Martens (2005), a LAN party commonly refers to an organized and competitive approach to playing computer games, runs for 24 hours a day, mostly on the weekends, or for a couple of days during a holiday. In principle, all game genres can be played at a LAN party. However, it is dominated by games with a multiplayer option in order to play against each other in competitive modes. These real-time face to face events bring people together and their machines for several days of intensive interaction and play (Jonsson, 2011).

For the past decade, this style of gaming has persisted around the globe and offers gamers a place to engage in gaming. We were interested in the aspect of a qualitative understanding of such phenomena as to characterizing those attracted to these events, the nature of their motivation and the actual engagement and experiences during the events. The aim of the research was to investigate two principal research questions. The first question was, who are the participants of a LAN party and what motivates them to play? We aim to provide a better understanding of this particular class of gamers. Therefore, we set out to establish demographic characteristics and gathered data about their gaming habits. The second purpose of this study was to examine the gamers’ experience when playing the digital video
game, in particular to understand how the player relates to the game and the virtual world in which the player ‘immerse’. Research on LAN parties has an existential phenomenological approach that may be proven useful in understanding how players relate to the game because it would allow the researcher to access the player’s experience and might provide greater insights into the world of the gamer (Whalen, 2013).

2 LAN Party and CyberFusion

LAN parties vary in sizes across different settings. There are small LAN parties ranging from five to ten people usually set up at home, middle-sized LAN with 100-200 participants that are arranged in universities or sport clubs, and mass LAN parties usually with more than 10,000 participants set up in huge exhibition halls (Jonsson, 2011). They are often a mix of people who already know each other to strangers coming together to meet for the first time. For most participants, it takes quite an effort to participate. They must organise transport, bring their own computers, risk damage to the equipment, pay an entrance fee, and stay overnight with their equipment.

CyberFusion is a massive LAN party that is held annually in Malaysia which promotes itself as South East Asia’s largest LAN party that hosts a total of 600 participants. Organised by gamers for gamers in Malaysia, CyberFusion started in 2009 and got into the Guinness Book of World Records for having the longest LAN party in the world (51-hour LAN party). CyberFusion 2015 held two kinds of events; 48-hour LAN party and e-sports tournaments that accommodated collaborative online games, including Defense of the Ancients 2 (DotA 2), Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS: GO), FIFA 16 and Ultra Street Fighter 4 with attractive prizes, including RM30,000 cash to win. In brief, CyberFusion is employed for entertainment purposes, a place to run away from everything just to play any games for three days two nights with free food and high-speed internet. It gathers gamers, young and old, who are willing to travel from all over Malaysia to meet up with friends and have a good time playing games non-stop.

3 LAN Party Game

3.1 Game Participants

300 gamers participated to play their favourite games in this particular LAN Party. Almost all participants in this event were male with other twenty female participants involved. Consequently, for this research, our sample consisted of 30 participants with male participants (28) being the majority and the remainder of two females. Individual participants were approached with a request to contribute to our research by completing a set of questionnaire. All the participants were approached just after an active game session after an active game session was over. It took the participants about twenty minutes to answer the set of questions. At the end of the list, they were given an option to fill in a form if they agreed for further contact. Some gamers expressed a particular interest in our study, but there were several who refused to participate. In some cases, the gamers volunteered themselves to answer the questionnaires.
3.2 Observation Method

In this study, the researcher(s) applied first-hand experiences which involved staying with the gamers from day to night on the second day of the event to conduct observation. This was applied during their gaming session as well as other activities (eating, sleeping, chatting with other gamers, etc.). The total amount of material videotaped during the event was 12 hours, consisting of descriptive general pictures. The empirical data for this research was collected during CyberFusion LAN party held in Multimedia University Malaysia, MMU Grand Hall Cyberjaya during 13th to 15th November 2015. The event was managed by two gaming media groups, Spotgamers and eSports Malaysia. The players along with their personal computers were all gathered in the university grand hall. The interior of the hall was spacious and filled with rows and rows of cloth covering long banquet tables, each marked with a printed alphabet (see Figure 1). Groups were based on chair rows instead of table rows so gamers were encouraged to interact across platforms. With around 300 LAN party gamers on the floor, the event became lively. Several sessions for lucky draws at regular intervals, a speed assembly competition for the fastest and most correct way to put together a gaming CPU, and mini tournaments live on stage were organised. Prizes were awarded to the team that completed all the challenges first.

Fig. 1. Participants at CyberFusion 2015 LAN party.

3.3 User Experience Method

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. First, 10 forced survey questions were set out to establish the demographic characteristics of the participants, in particular with respect to their age, gender, race, social relations, and occupational status. In addition, we gathered data about their gaming habits such as the time spent on gaming, frequency of gaming, the platform they played on (PC or game console), and their preferences toward a particular game mode, specifically during the LAN party. The second part was a set of 28 scaled statements meant to tap for their motives. The participants were asked to express whether they agreed
or disagreed with the statements on a Likert type five-point scale (1 = disagree totally; 5 = agree totally). We relied on Janz and Martens (2005) in constructing the items concerning the motives of gamers on gaming in a LAN party such as competition, social, or even for the mere sake of interest. Subsequently, in part three, we asked background details about their current game playing (i.e. game genre, platform, difficulty levels, and gamers stage) and then participants were correlated to the relevant Likert type five-point scale (1 = not at all; to 5 = very much so). This led to an overall immersion score we relied on Immersive Experience Questionnaire (IEQ) by Jennett et al. (2008). Measuring immersion is one of the most important elements in researching immersive experience to know gamers’ level of engagement with games (Cairns, Cox & Nordin, 2014). The minimum score of IEQ is 31 and the maximum score is 155. The score could be used as an indicator whether participants were engaged (between 31- 90), engrossed (between 91- 120), or totally immersed (between 121-155) into the games. Since this involved grading gaming experience, the scores allowed us to group gamers according to whether they are experiencing higher or lower amounts of immersion. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 20.

4 Results

Qualitative analysis revealed a thematic structure consisting of two distinct contexts which are playing with the environment and motives. The following section describes some of the sample findings in relation to the gamers' behaviour and motives towards gaming during the observed gaming sessions. The research provided plenty of material related to gamer’s behaviour and social motives during the event. Some of the examples were selected from the video recordings while others have been formulated from interviews.

Playing world

The games that were played during the event were selected according to the gamers' wishes. The games they mostly played were Defense of the Ancients 2 (DotA 2), Call of Duty: Back Ops 3, and the latest game that they look forward to the most was Star Wars Battlefront. The female gamers were more inclined to play Destiny. Most of them came as a clan, or through mutual friends. Many were yearly attendees of CyberFusion, either with a PC or a console. Since computers are the main platform to play games in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2015), there were also gamers who had their PC custom-made. These CPUs come with huge bulking and coloured casings, clear casings, and glowing cooling tubes, and CPU with aerodynamic casings and flashing LED lights, big and sleek monitors and so forth (see Figure 2). Despite this, the gamers were using headphones to increase their sensitivity to contextual audio information and to suppress the background music provided by the organizers.
Gamers were allowed to eat and drink while sitting at their desk. Some gamers left their seats to eat away from the keyboards while other gamers were eating at the computer equipment. The menu consisted of fast foods and pre-packaged food, such as snacks, candies, chips, coffee, sodas, and chocolate bars. One of the participants explained that, ‘When we come to a place like this, we prefer unhealthy food. Sodas and candies give players quick energy that can be consumed instantly and does not interfere game play’ (Azri).

Apparently, the gamers in CyberFusion do sleep and take interval short breaks, and not everyone was doing the literal 48-hour gaming non-stop routing. There were some gamers who had slept right up next to their expensive gaming rigs, wrapping themselves in a blanket. Meanwhile, others set up camp in dome tents in a corner prepared by the organisers. Despite this, to endure through the three day event, to be able to stay awake, young players consume energy drinks that help in providing them with quick energy to be able to perform, play and avoid from falling asleep. Even when they were asleep, they managed to stay fixed in their chairs without the help of straps or seatbelts. Even their hands were attached to their mouse, keyboard, or controllers. Moreover, at odd moments, they jolted wide awake and continued their game mode like they had not paused. Figure 3 and 4 show moments during the party.
Playing motives

The need to socialise is one of the main reasons for participating at LAN event with social places for hanging out and gain enjoyable experiences. When gamers attended CyberFusion they not only experience online virtual games but they also experience and enjoy the social atmosphere influenced by music, gamers gathered together, and the many social activities and events are going on. Moreover, to become a stronger clan or team, the participants mentioned that they would designate time to meet online to practice and work on improving their gaming skills. A few participants talked about utilizing features of games to review their performance with their teammates. As one had put it, ‘It was social and competitive at
the same time. It was social when you were not playing, and then when you were playing’ (Liza).

Furthermore, game settings such as in CyberFusion allow gamers to play within a physical presence of friends and other players, and for tactile interactions and experiences with other players. The tactile experiences allowed in the form of gameplay at CyberFusion comes from the sharing of an intimate space, supporting and encouraging each other during gameplay. One of the participants explained that, ‘In the online setting, gamers were able to play and communicate with their teammates in real time via headsets or by typing messages to one another. However, when you are here like this, it is another feeling’ (Saiful).

What is apparent after attending a LAN party event such as CyberFusion is that the experience and enjoyment of participating in these settings are more than merely interacting with other gamers and experiencing games. When people are attending a LAN party, they not only experience playing in online virtual worlds but they will also have the opportunity to enjoy its overall social aspect.

Another research question asked was whom the visitors of a LAN event consisted of, in particularly with respect to their age, gender, social relations, and their gaming behaviour. There were 28 men and 2 women in our sample. Approximately 93.3% participants were male aged between 18-35 years old. The mean age of the participants was 26.5. The majority race comprised of Malay (80.7%), Chinese (16.7%), and Indian (3.3%). The occupational status 66.7% were working fulltime and 33.3% were students. Most of the participants possessed a PC (90%) and some of our samples possessed a console (10%). On the basis of the time they devoted to gaming, the descriptive analysis for the duration of play shows that 53.3% played almost every day, 30% played every day, and 13.3% have played several times a week. While in each gaming session during this party, most of them (50%) played for 2-3 hours, 26.7% played for 4-5 hours, 10% played for 6-7 hours, 6.7% played for one hour, and 3.3% played more than 8 hours and less than one hour. For gaming mode preferences, it is showed that playing in the form of online multiplayer in cooperative/competitive mode are most preferred (66.7%), compared to offline multiplayer (23.3%), and single player (10%). Game consoles, such as the Xbox 360 and Sony’s PlayStation were widely proliferated. Numerous of the participants played Multiplayer Online Battle Arena, (MOBA) namely Defense of the Ancients 2, (DotA 2).

To sum up, the participants of the LAN party were mostly adolescent Malay men, although other races were also present. Most LAN participants were employed workers, but the younger gamers consisted of students. The participants were well equipped with a computer and often with another kind of gaming facility. They happen to spend quite a deal of time on gaming, and like to play online multiplayer in cooperative/competitive mode during the event. The LAN party may be attractive to young people in particular to have fun and take a break. Other than that, they could also socialise with other gamers. Our next research question asked what motivated them to play in this LAN event. We computed the overall mean score for each of the motive scales. The most frequently rated motives of gaming are for social (M = 4.45), followed by interest (M = 4.03), and competition (M = 3.70). The unequal distribution of men (N=28) and women (N=2) in our sample, however, did not allow us to test gender differences in motives. Nonetheless, half of the participants (46.7%) were totally immersed into the games (M=130.86), 40% were engrossed (M=109.58) and 10% were engaged (M=83) as shown in Figure 5. We then tested whether the immersion score was related to various
aspects of gaming details such as game genre, level of play (i.e. easy, medium, hard) and gamers stage (i.e. beginner, amateur, expert). An ANOVA test for difference game genre (F(3,25)=.663; p=n.s.), level of play (F(3,25)=1.772; p=n.s.), and gamers stage (F(3,25)=.961; p=n.s.) as factors and the immersion score as dependent variable show that there was no significant effect for immersion score.

![Immersion Level](image)

**Fig. 5.** Immersion level among the participants.

5 Discussion

The age range of the gamers in LAN party was between 18 and 35 years, which confirm that adolescents are active gamers, but they also show that some gamers can be older. The adolescents LAN gamer are single. However, many older gamers are in a relationship, and live independently. The fact that 93.3% of the LAN participants were male radically confirms the overrepresentation of (young) men among gamers (Janz & Martens, 2005). Another essential point, CyberFusion 2015 shows that there is growing presence of female gamers involved. Female players create the presence of familiarity and this is not restricted in only games and their gaming methods, but also having a computer of one’s own to play on. In the same way, these female gamers also join others on stage for e-sports tournaments, competing in first person shooter matches, downloading new games and testing them. In term of game usage, LAN gamers devote each day to gaming and spend up to two to three hours in a single session. Besides, there are also gamers who spend up to eight hours in gaming. Furthermore, there are gamers that spend at certain time of the day their time in developing their gaming hobby. Thus, in terms of media use, the participants of a LAN party can definitely be characterised as ‘heavy gamers’ (Janz & Martens, 2005).

Equally important were the motives for gaming at this LAN party. The result showed that social and interest intentions obtained the highest overall score in gaming motives at LAN parties. Gamers of a LAN party are particularly motivated to socialise (i.e. the physical
presence of other gamers). LAN party not only gives gamers the possibility for face-to-face interaction with fellow gangs from around the country, but can also participate in gaming communities from all platforms and genres. In addition, access to high speed Internet made communication and collaboration among teams easier in the LAN party. It has been shown that the gamers in this study who are socially motivated to participate in a LAN party have a keen interest in what other gamers do, and are often part of a clan of gamers. Although they spend a lot of time on gaming, their behaviour seems quite different from the prototypical introvert person who shy away from social contact. Nonetheless, a higher interest motive indicate would encourage gamers to learn new games and gaming practices. Watching others play is a compelling part of a LAN party, with so many gamers publicly displaying themselves and their screens for each other. For instance, during the event, gamers were observing other gamers’ screens for aesthetic pleasure and to seek for a strategy to learn new techniques in succeeding a game. This is in line with Taylor and Witkowski (2010) who claimed that by looking at the games can inspire us to reactivate our own sense and desire to play such as playing the game in our own computer.

Another essential point is that the immersion score among the gamers during the LAN party were high. LAN party provided the gamers with experience in playing in the multiplayer or clans, which means that the gamer would have experience of game play in social environments. For instance, social interactions aspect already seen in many games, a very large number of players interact with one another within a virtual world of MMORPG games like Defense of the Ancients or team vs team games in first person shooters like the Call of Duty and Star Wars Battlefront series. Besides, the same games can be played as an individual without the need for any social connection, in a social group online, or in a co-located social group in LAN parties. It is clear that people are more immersed when they are playing against other players than when they are playing against a computer. The present finding also supports Cairn et al. (2013) study which concluded that when gamers are playing against each other, the sense of immersion increases. How the immersion arises may be strongly influenced by the social context of the game and the activities within the game which players have to engage in. Playing games socially is an important part of the gamer’s experience. It seems that when they play digital games socially they are not only able to immerse themselves in the world, but they are also able to do so in the company of others (Cairn et al. 2013).

6 Conclusion

The study reported in this article is the first step for a further voyage into understanding game engagement. A LAN party like CyberFusion gives us us the opportunity to explore gamers' behaviour and understand how actual engagement and experiences are formed during the events. The significance of this article as well the fieldwork conducted provide an in-depth understanding of the gamers and their engaging experience by measuring their gaming experiences in the LAN party. Based on our observation, it is interesting to note that these gamers are driven by their passion and enthusiasm that also results in the success of the event. Harnessing such energy that was witnessed in this event could be utilised to foster constructive and positive outcomes, such as increasing social blending and communication, releasing day-to-day stress and tension. Further studies on the use of engaging technologies for leisure would surely open many interesting discoveries.
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References


