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Casual games and gender

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Abstract

This paper discusses the question: “Why do more women play casual games than men, if altogether more men play computer games than women?”

Gender seems to have an impact upon the affinity towards different kinds of games and upon how much effort a person is willing to invest while playing a computer game. This is indicated by the different gender ratios of casual and hardcore gamers. Many potential gamers do not identify themselves with the stereotype of ‘real’ gamers, i.e., hardcore gamers, who are often seen as being young, male and lacking social skills. This could be one of the reasons why women and older people more frequently play the less ‘real’ or ‘typical’ casual games while often not seeing themselves as ‘computer gamers’.

However, there are indications that the primary factor for the preference towards casual or hardcore games is, in fact, not gender. On the contrary, gender (as well as age) could cloud the more important variables, such as experience with computers or time allocation.

For a better picture of the relationship between the different variables we would need more empirical data.

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1 Stereotypes change – more and more women play computer games

When speaking of computer game players (computer gamers) most people think of teenage males who lack social skills and spend all day sitting in front of their computers shooting down hoards of virtual enemies. Statistics, however, paint a different picture. Significantly more females over the age of 18 (30%) play computer games than males under 18 (23%). The average age of computer gamers has risen to 33, and 38% of all gamers are women (Entertainment Software Association 2006 p. 4).

The growth of the computer game market has led to a diversification in different subsegments, one of which being the casual games market. In this market the target consumer group is women over 35 (Macrovision 2006). Casual games are typically developed with this consumer group in mind.

The thing that makes the casual gamer interesting for sociological research is their special demographics.

Why do more women play casual games than men, if altogether more men play computer games than women?

In this paper I will focus on the topic of casual games and gender. Casual games as such are a fairly new phenomenon and have not received much attention from the scholarly world.

This has two consequences for this paper. First, I will begin with a detailed chapter in which I offer a definition of casual games to help the reader with a systematic approach to this new topic. The second implication of writing about this new field of casual games is the lack of existing empirical data to test my hypotheses about casual games and gender. Unfortunately, it would have been beyond the scale of this paper to conduct my own empirical research. Therefore, this paper raises many more questions than it provides answers – answers which will hopefully be provided by future research.¹

2 Definitions – What are casual games?

In this chapter I will outline the subject matter of this paper. In doing this I will start with a general definition of *games* and then move on to more specific definitions for *computer games*, *casual games* and finally *try-before-you-buy casual games*.

Jesper Juul defines *games* as the following:

¹ I am currently preparing future research about casual games including surveys.

“A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.” (Juul 2003)

Juul (2003) says that games are *transmedial*: “There is no single game medium, but rather a number of game media, each with its own strengths. The computer is simply the latest game medium to emerge.” Therefore a *computer-game* is a game on the medium computer, a „game played using computer power“ (Juul “Computergame” 2006)².

But what is the difference between *computer-* and *video-games*? “A video game is a computer game where a video display such as a monitor or television is the primary feedback device” (Wikipedia, „Computer and video games“, 2006). Following this definition, almost all computer games are also video games.³

In common usage a *video game* refers to a *console game*, meaning a game which is played on game consoles, which are computers especially designed for playing games.

In the same context computer games are referred to as games being played on personal computers (Windows, MacOS).

To avoid ambiguity the term *computer games* is used in this paper for all games which are played on computers (analog to Juul’s „game played using computer power“). This includes all video and console games. The distinction between personal computer games (played on a PC) and console games will be touched upon again later in this paper.

There are various possibilities to further divide computer games into different categories.

A classification into genres concerning the game-play is the most common, e.g. action games, racing games, strategy games, puzzle games or adventure games. In a strategy game, strategic thinking is required of the player. Time is normally not an issue. Action games are a matter of fast reaction and control of input devices. In real time strategy games, both needs (speed and tactical thinking) are combined.

Another classification system for games is the distinction by means of the gaming device. We already discussed the distinction into personal computer and console games. We could add other devices such as mobile games which run on mobile phones.

² See also Juul 2005.

³ There are also some computer games which use other methods, such as sound or vibration, as their primary feedback device, which, for example, can also be played by the blind. (Wikipedia „Computer and video games“ 2006)

Computer games also differ in the number of simultaneously participating players. Many games are single player. Other games live by the active and constitutive participation of thousands, or even millions, of users (Compare Castronova 2005).

In this paper we use a different distinction: The investment a player has to make to have a satisfying[UT1] game session. The two extremes of this investment scale are called *hardcore games* and *casual games*.⁴

In the Casual games Whitepaper 2006 casual games are described as follows: „Games that generally involve less complicated game controls and overall complexity in terms of game-play or investment required to get through game.”

In contrast, hardcore games “generally involve more complicated game controls and overall complexity in terms of game-play or investment required to get through game.” (Casual games Whitepaper p. 6)

In a hardcore game a player has to invest much more time or skill to reach a satisfying gaming experience, whereas investment does not mean the price of a game. On a gaming console hardcore and casual games normally do not differ in price. This is different on a PC, where casual games normally cost less than hardcore games. But here sales strategies for both game types are so different that the prices can not easily be compared.

Higher investment in this context means:

- Hardcore games use more complex input methods which first have to be mastered. The input device of the Playstation 2, the most popular game console, has two analogue and one digital stick, six analogue and five digital buttons (Wikipedia „Dualshock 2“ 2006). Most hardcore games for the personal computer use complex combinations of simultaneous inputs with keyboard and mouse. To successfully play a hardcore game you have to learn to handle these complex input methods. Most casual games only demand that you move and left-click the mouse (Casual Games Whitepaper 2006 p. 46).
- Hardcore games often feature complex game mechanics and cannot be played without reading an instructions manual or playing a long tutorial. In comparison, casual games are rather simple and ideally self-explanatory.
- An error while playing a hardcore game is often punished severely and can have strong consequences upon the following game session. While playing hardcore games, users often have to deal with failures which can lead to frustration. Often a failure means the death of the game character. Casual games punish the player much less or give him much more time before it ‘gets serious’. A recommendation for casual game designers is that random clicks during the

⁴ Sometimes a third category, the *“core games”*, is set between hardcore and casual games (Casual Games Whitepaper 2006 p. 6). However, the distinction in three categories would complicate matters and is not necessary for this paper. I treat core games as belonging to the hardcore games category.

first 20 seconds of a game should not lead to failure (Kapalka 2006). Experiencing a failure is normally not as frustrating as in hardcore games, seeing as the gamer does not lose as much and can more easily continue from where he left off.

- Hardcore games are complex and need players to be concentrated during long game sessions. On the contrary, most casual games can be played in short game sessions and without the total attention of the player. Jonas Antonsson (2006) describes this as follows: “But what a casual game HAS to do (in my view) is allow the player to feel casual. The player should be able to be up and running in no time, be allowed to leave the game at any time (without feeling that it has some major consequences on his status if he chooses to return to the game).”

Hardcore games are often considered to be the traditional games, but this does not seem to actually be the case. Many of the first computer games (e.g. Pong) were extremely simple. For this reason, it seems much more fitting to say that hardcore games are the typical computer games. When people speak of computer gamers, they generally mean people playing hardcore games.

As games in general, casual games are transmedial. There are casual games on practically all computer game platforms. For a more reasonable analysis I will limit myself in this paper to try-before-you-buy casual games on the personal computer. The reason for this is that casual games on game consoles and personal computers differ in both history and audience. The distinction between hardcore games and casual games is only several years old and was mostly raised because of the success of the try-before-you-buy casual games. Another reason is that one of the things which makes casual games interesting as phenomenon is the high ratio of female players. And this high ratio is especially evident in the try-before-you-buy casual games market.

Not all casual games on the PC are try-before-you-buy casual games. What makes them special is the sales strategy. The customer can try a limited version of the game without paying. If he likes it, he can then buy the unlimited version. Typical limitations are, for example, that the try version only includes some of the game features or levels or can only be played for a limited time (usually 60 minutes).

Almost all of the try-before-you-buy casual games are download games. This means you can download the trial version and, if purchased, the full version on your computer and install them for playing off-line.⁵

Some of the most famous try-before-you-buy casual games are Bejeweled, Zuma, Diner Dash or in Germany some of the Moorhuhn-Jagd⁶ games. A list of popular casual games with links to free trial versions can be found in the annex.

⁵ There are also some trial versions which can be played directly in the browser without having to install the game files.

⁶ The most famous German casual game, „Moorhuhn Jagd“, was originally a free ad game for the Scottish whisky brand “Johnny Walker”. Only some of the later versions of Moorhuhn are try-before-

3 Scientific examination of casual games

Casual games seem to be on the rise. The overall turnover with games for personal computers and game consoles remains constant (2001 \$6,1 bn., 2004: \$7,4 bn., 2005: \$7,0 bn.) while games for personal computers only add up to one seventh of that amount (2005: \$0,95 bn) (Entertainment Software Association 2006 p. 10f).

Contrary to these numbers the still pretty new casual games industry seems to be booming[UT2]. Overall turnover more than doubled in western countries between 2001 (\$91 m.) and 2005 (\$189 m.) (Screen Digest 2004, p. 8). This number is expected to be much higher if ad revenue of the casual games portals were included. These ad revenues are (in addition to the actual game sales) the second largest revenue stream of the portals which sell casual games. However, no exact data is present.

But why are casual games a topic for sociology?

There is a big demographical difference between the average computer gamer and casual gamer.

- The average computer gamer is 33 years old, 62% are male, 38% female (Entertainment Software Association 2006 p. 4)⁷.
- 65% of the casual gamers are older than 35, only 29 % are male, 71 % are female (Macrovision 2006)⁸.

The different demographics of computer gamers as a whole and the subset of casual gamers leads us to the question:

Why do more women play casual games than men, if altogether more men play computer games than women?

In the following chapter I will discuss several hypotheses which could explain the difference between the demographics of both groups.

you-buy casual games (Wikipedia „Moorhuhn Computerspiel“ 2006). In the following, casual games refers to try-before-you-buy casual games.

⁷ These numbers refer to computer gamers in the USA, the biggest market for computer games and casual games. Because this market offers the best data about demography and market size I will be referring in the following to the US market.

⁸ It is not easy to find demographic data about casual gamers. As far as I know there are no industry-wide figures. Therefore, I decided to use numbers from casual games websites. The numbers I am referring to are taken from the trygames portal (Macrovision). Trygames is a relatively large portal which offers and sells hardcore and try-before-you-buy casual games. While they are also offering some hardcore games, the portal is clearly dominated by casual games. The Trygames figures correspond largely with figures from other sources (Casual games Paper 2006, p. 9-10) but are more comprehensive as well as more current (2006).

3.1 Do women prefer different game experiences than men do?

One possibility why casual games are much more popular with women than with men is that casual games give women the game experience they are looking for. That most women play differently and play different games as men has been researched and established repeatedly.

Fritz states (1995 p. 240): “Our Observations in actual game situations support our assumption that there are typical boy and girl games. Girls favour funny, ‘peaceful’, comic-style games, in which one has to survive adventures and ‘existential’ threats are minimized. Boys clearly prefer game scenarios which highlight combat.”⁹

Malone (1981) and Greenfield (1996) assume that violent content in many computer games is an important factor for girls to stay away from computer games in general.

Subrahmanyam and Greenfield write: „To summarize, studies of computer game design and game preferences suggest that girls are less enthusiastic than boys about the thematic embedding of good versus evil in story narratives. Nor, (...) do they like the violent feedback that normally accompanies such themes.” (Cassel 1998 p. 53). Furthermore women, in contrast to men, seem to prefer more realistic game settings to fantasy or science fiction settings.

This leads us to the question whether hardcore games are more focused on game styles which are preferred by male players and casual games are more focused on games styles which are preferred by female players.

An example for this assumed difference in playing styles could be the amount of violence in the games in the two markets. Therefore, we could compare the top-selling computer and casual games depending on how much violence is packed into them. To do this, let us take a closer look at the playing styles and ratings the games received.¹⁰

Top 20 selling video games of 2005 by units sold in the USA

Rank	Title	Platform	Rating¹¹
1	MADDEN NFL 06	PS2	E
2	GRAN TURISMO 4	PS2	E

⁹ „Nach unseren Beobachtungen in konkreten Spielsituationen bestätigen sich die Vermutungen, dass es typische Jungen- und typische Mädchenspiele gibt. Mädchen bevorzugen lustige, ‚friedliche‘, comicartige Spiele, bei denen Abenteuer zu bestehen sind und die ‚existenziellen‘ Gefährdungen minimalisiert erscheinen. Bei den Jungen liegen in der Präferenz kampfbestimmte Spielszenarien deutlich vorne.“ (Fritz 1995 p. 240); translation by the author.

¹⁰ I do not have access to combined numbers of personal computer games and console games. I will use the console game numbers because they reflect the bigger market.

¹¹ Ratings by Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).

3 MADDEN NFL 06	XBX	E
4 NCAA FOOTBALL 06	PS2	E
5 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II	PS2	T
6 MVP BASEBALL 2005	PS2	E
7 SW EPISODE III: SITH	PS2	T
8 NBA LIVE 06	PS2	E
9 LEGO STAR WARS	PS2	E
10 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II	XBX	T
11 WWE SMACKDOWN! VS RAW 2006	PS2	T
12 GOD OF WAR	PS2	M
13 MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB	PS2	T
14 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT PS2	PS2	T
15 NEED SPEED: MOST WANTED	PS2	T
16 SOCOM 3: US NAVY SEALS	PS2	M
17 GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS	PS2	M
18 TONY HAWK AMERICAN WASTELAND	PS2	T
19 RESIDENT EVIL 4	GCN	M
20 CALL OF DUTY 2: BIG RED ONE	PS2	T

(Entertainment Software Association 2006 p. 4)

Within the 20 top-selling console games of 2005 in the USA there are seven games with an “Everyone Rating” (six or older), nine games with a “Teen Rating” (13 years or older) and four with a “Mature Rating” (17 or older) (Entertainment Software Association 2006 und Entertainment Software Ratings Board 2006). Alongside several sport games (Football, Baseball, Basketball) are games in which players act as brutal gangsters, elite soldiers and even a war god which has to kill hoards of virtual enemies.

Global Casual games top 10. Week 17 (17-24.07.2006)

Rang Titel

- 1 Diner Dash 2
 - 2 Cake Mania
 - 3 Mystery Case Files: Prime Suspects
 - 4 Big Kahuna Reef 2
 - 5 Mystery Case Files: Huntsville
 - 6 Mystic Inn
 - 7 Super Collapse 3
 - 8 Fish Tycoon
 - 9 Gold Miner Vegas
 - 10 SpongeBob SquarePants Diner Dash
- (Logler 2006)

A comparison of these ratings poses a problem, simply because casual games are not normally rated. However, by playing the games on this casual games top 10 list you notice that there is not one game with noteworthy violence. In Diner Dash 2 and Mystic Inn the player runs a restaurant, in Cake Mania the player bakes. Games in which you arrange coloured stones in rows, find hidden objects or play cards are also very popular.

The discrepancy in game design and the differing gender ratio between computer and casual games supports the assumption that there are male and female game styles which are served by different markets.

3.2 Casual games are being developed for women

The success of the Atari game 'Pong' in 1972 represented the mass market for computer games (Wikipedia "Pong" 2006). Suddenly there was a high demand for people who could program computer games. As, at the time, almost all programmers were male, most game programmers were as well. These programmers had the task of making games which they thought others would like and pay for. Because no one had much experience with computer games they basically made games which they liked to play themselves.

This meant that computer games were developed by male programmers for male customers. Most females did not like these "male" computer games. Therefore the computer games market, both on the developer as well as on the consumer side, was (and is still) dominated by men.

Sara Kiesler wrote in 1985: „Although the data are fragmentary, the world of computing seems to be more consistent with male adolescent culture than with feminine values and goals. Furthermore, both arcade and educational software is designed with boys in mind. These observations lead us to speculate that computing is neither inherently difficult nor uninteresting to girls, but rather that computer games and other software might have to be designed differently for girls.” (Kiesler 1985 p.451)

This situation did not change until 1996: “Most commercially available video games still do not reflect the interest and tastes of half of the potential game-playing population, namely girls.” (Kafai 1996)

The massive success of 'Barbie Fashion Designer' in 1996 and 1997 showed the huge financial potential of possible female gamers to the male-dominated game developer scene.

In response, several companies were founded to develop games especial for girls (e.g. Girl Games, Her Interactive). It soon became evident that the surprising success of the Barbie Fashion Designer game was not rooted in the popular Barbie brand. The other Barbie computer games were by far not as popular. Most of the games in that era which were made by women for girls were not successful. Often they were an antitheses of the "male" computer games which did not seem cater to the taste of girls. The hype for girls games was soon over.

The success of the try-before-you-buy casual games with senior women came more or less as a surprise. Today, as the casual games industry sees that the majority of its consumers are women

between 35 and 50, most of the casual games are developed for that target group. (Casual Games Whitepaper 2006, S 10).

The casual game designers are trying to appeal to the tastes and playing styles of these older women, and they seem to be more successful than the girl games designers at the end of the 90s.

Another thing casual game designers and the people who market these games have to take into account is the social standing of gamers or, shall we say, 'real' gamers.

3.3 Women don't want to be computer gamers

What are 'real' computer games? Sweedyk und de Laet answer this question as follows: „They are games that gamers play. But what matters is not so much what these games are, but what they do: these 'real' games make gamers. They act as rites of passage into the gaming world. (...) But as the gaming culture defines 'real' games it also defines what does not count as 'real.' The misperception that women do not play computer games stems from the fact that the gaming culture does not consider the games that they do play as 'real.' (Sweedyk und de Laet, 2005 p. 2)

This is probably a reason for the success of casual games with senior women. Maybe the majority of casual gamers does not want to see themselves as gamers, as game fans. The casual games designer Colin Cardwell writes: “Video games and core games have a culture associated with them and there is a lot of people who actively don't want to be associated with that culture and all that goes along with it. They still love games though, so they either play games like The Sims¹² or they play casual games. Simply put, they don't identify with shooting other people or things and they don't identify with the generally dark atmospheres of many of the 'core' games.” (Cardwell 2006)

Unfortunately I know of no research data about how casual gamers characterise a typical computer gamer or if casual gamers see themselves as computer gamers.

But from talking to people you get the impression that many people have negative associations with the term 'computer gamer'. They themselves don't want to be associated with these stereotypes. Yet some of them play with computers. We can argue, according to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1978), that these women try to reduce the uncomfortable dissonance between what they want and what they do. They manage to reduce this dissonance by redefining what they do and by resorting to selective perception. They are not playing 'real' computer games, they are not 'really' playing, therefore they are not computer gamers. They define casual games not as playing computer games and therefore ignore that they are in fact computer gamers.

¹² “The Sims“ is the most successful computer game of all times. 50% of sales are attributed to women. (Wikipedia “The Sims” 2006)

This reduction of dissonance is eased by the segregation of the casual game market within the computer games market. Many computer gamers read computer game magazines. But, in these, casual games are mostly ignored. The same happens on hardcore games websites. Furthermore, although casual games and hardcore games websites both deal with games, they are very rarely linked.

The segregation between the casual and the hardcore games market is at least in part intended by the industry. If many casual gamers don't like the thought of being a real computer gamer, it is better for a casual games company to give him the impression that he, in fact, is not a computer gamer.

Let us take a look at the web representation of Electronic Arts, the world's biggest computer games publisher. Electronic Arts is organized into different divisions: EA, EA Sports, EA Sports Big, EA Mobile and POGO.com (its casual games website). While all these divisions are directed at computer gamers, there is a clear division between the hardcore and casual game web presentations.

All of the different division websites have links to the other websites at the top of the page, except on POGO.com. There you only find an EA logo and small links to the other divisions at the very bottom of the page. None of the EA hardcore games are reviewed or advertised on the casual games POGO.com. While the all the hardcore games divisions use the EA corporate design, the POGO.com site emphasises its own brandname.

Although there is a smooth transition between casual and hardcore games, both markets are clearly kept apart. Intentionally cross-marketing is not done.

One aspect of the stereotype of a computer gamer is being especially young. One way to protect casual gamers from the thought of being a gamer is therefore to design casual games so that they do not appear too 'childish': "The key is to not make the player feel they are playing a game for kids. [...] Since] most downloads get purchased by an older audience players in general get put off by "cute" characters or visual elements that make the sensation of watching a Saturday morning cartoon. Exceptions to this case tend to gravitate towards those games who have a realistic theme (e.g., *Cake Mania*) or have UI and supporting graphics with a mature look (e.g., *Chuzzle*)." (Casual Games Whitepaper 2006 p. 48)

If the casual games market continues to grow, casual games will become more common. This could mean that at some point casual games could be seen as 'real' games and the people playing them as real gamers. As many of the casual gamers are senior women, this could lead to a change in the stereotype of the 'typical' gamer, paving the road for playing computer games to become a real mass phenomena like watching TV.

3.4 Are casual gamers less experienced with computer games?

Up until now I have discussed the hypothesis that women, because of their gender, are more likely to play casual games than hardcore games. This means that they have a higher affinity to casual games due to their cultural socialisation and its corresponding gender roles.

In the following I will change my focus to the hypothesis that it is not the gender which explains the popularity of casual games among women, but rather that the connection between the two is a spurious correlation. This means that the apparent link between casual games and gender could actually be explained by other correlations with variables such as age and a person's experience with computers.

As discussed earlier, one basic difference between casual and hardcore games is the complexity of input. To successfully control most hardcore games you need sufficient experience with a keyboard and mouse. In general women have less experience with computers and especially with computer games. More boys grow up playing computer games than girls. In general, boys are more familiar with the way computer games work as well as with what it takes to play computer games successfully (Kiesler 1985). If a person has no or very little experience with computers, then he will be much more likely to have a satisfying game session with a casual game. If this person is directly confronted with a hardcore game, he will probably 'lose' and quickly become frustrated.

A possibility to describe why a person can have fun playing computer games is *flow*: „The concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) describes an optimal mental state where a person is completely occupied with a task that matches the person's skills, being neither too hard (leading to anxiety) or easy (leading to boredom)” (Juul “Flow” 2006).

For an inexperienced computer user it is much more probable to get into a flow state while playing a casual game than a hardcore game. For a hardcore gamer the same game would probably be too easy or seem too banal. It would not challenge him enough, so that he would not get into a flow state. This could probably be another reason why he would not characterise this casual game as a 'real' game.

If it is not the gender but the experience with computers or computer games that influences the affinity to casual games, what other variables could have an impact? Computers and computer games have been around since the seventies. Today, the second generation is growing up with games. But still, older people usually have less experience with computers than younger people. Also, data suggests that the average casual gamer is older than the average hardcore gamer.

Research should test whether there is a direct influence of gender and age on the affinity towards casual and hardcore games or if gender and age primarily predict the experience with computers or computer games.

3.5 Time allocation and the casual gamer

Another variable which is frequently discussed as having an impact on gaming preferences is the time a player is able or willing to invest into gaming. The question as to how much free time casual or hardcore gamers possess or in which way the time allocation of male and female gamers differs goes beyond the scale of this article.

Another aspect which is connected with time is the length of game sessions. Most casual games are designed to make them rewarding even while playing short sessions (e.g. five minutes). The idea that casual games are often played in offices during short breaks has led to the alternative name 'coffee break games'. However, recent data indicates that game sessions seem to be much longer than expected. In a survey about casual games, two thirds described their game sessions as being longer than one hour and 31 percent as longer than two hours. 73% answered that they played during the night (Macrovision 2006).

Is the time which casual or hardcore gamers allocate for gaming comparable? Some casual gamers compare playing casual games to zapping through TV-channels. Others, while playing, simultaneously watch TV, listen to music or are in some other way or form distracted. This is usually not possible while playing most hardcore games because of the greater need to focus on the game. Are casual gamers then searching for easy entertainment, while hardcore gamers are looking for a challenge?

Time allocation could have an impact on gaming preferences, but there is, to date, not enough data to find satisfactory answers.

4 The future of casual games research

Gender seems to have an impact upon the affinity towards different kinds of games and upon how much effort a person is willing to invest while playing a computer game. This is indicated by the different gender ratios of casual and hardcore gamers.

The general 'game culture' has an influence upon which computer games and computer gamers are perceived as being 'real'. Many potential gamers do not identify themselves with the stereotype or habitus of 'real' gamers, i.e., hardcore gamers, who are often seen as being young, male and lacking social skills. This could be one of the reasons why women and older people more frequently play the less 'real' or 'typical' casual games while often not seeing themselves as 'computer gamers'.

However, there are indications that the primary factor for the preference towards casual or hardcore games is, in fact, not gender. On the contrary, gender (as well as age) could cloud the more important variables, such as experience with computers or time allocation.

For a better picture of the relationship between the different variables we would need more empirical data.

Another subject area is connected to the question: *Are casual games a pathfinder for hardcore games?*

Respectively: *Do casual gamers become hardcore gamers in the long run?*

There are points which support this assumption. Through casual games, potential users are slowly introduced to the world of computer games in general, including hardcore games. But it is probable that at least part of the casual gamers are looking for a different gaming experience than hardcore gamers. More likely they just want to relax – something they cannot do while playing the more confronting and complex hardcore games.

After years of growth the games market has been stagnating lately. Presumably most of the potential hardcore gamers already play. In their search for *new* customers the main console producers Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft are increasingly interested in casual games. All three have announced casual game portals for their seventh generation consoles (XBOX 360, Playstation 3 and Wii). ‘Live Arcade 360’, the first of these portals, seems to have been quite successful for Microsoft. Nintendo’s strategy to target non-players with their new console ‘Wii’ is especially interesting. Nintendo is trying to expand their market through marketing showing typical non-gamers playing with their motion-sensitive, and therefore, intuitive to use, controller. The idea behind this is to lower the entrance barrier for non-gamers. For this reason, a good deal of the launch titles for Wii are actually casual games such as Wii Sports and Wii Play.

If one important strategy of the computer games industry is to increasingly reach non-players through casual games, we need to know more about who casual gamers really are and how they differ from hardcore gamers. This is one of the reasons why further research on user profiles of computer gamers is needed.

About the author:

After spending some time involved in television production, Ulrich Tausend co-founded the company Neodelight in 2000. Among other things Neodelight developed the mobile phone and browser-based massively multiplayer game “Zoing” which was then put onto the market together with Vodafone-Germany. Neodelight also designed one of the first MMS games for Ericsson. Today Neodelight produces browser-based games and runs its own casual games website (www.neodelight.com).

In addition to his work at Neodelight, Ulrich Tausend is currently writing his master’s thesis in sociology on the topic “Casual games and gender” at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich.

5 Appendix

Examples of try-before-you-buy-casual games:

- Bejewled 2 (Popcap, <http://www.popcap.com/launchpage.php?theGame=bejeweled2&src=leftnav>)
- Diner Dash: (PlayFirst <http://www.playfirst.com/game/dinerdash>)
- Mystery Case Files Huntsville (Bigfishgames, <http://www.bigfishgames.com/downloads/mysterycasefiles/index.html>)
- Zuma (Popcap <http://www.popcap.com/launchpage.php?theGame=zuma&src=leftnav>)
- Moorhuhn X (Phenimedia, http://www.moorhuhn.de/mh_games_x.php)

The free trial versions of these games can be found at the above internet addresses.

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