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The Virality of Gaming in Society

# Introduction

Gaming is a form of new media that enhances story telling through user interactions. Since it’s first introduction in 1947, it has proven to be valuable to society on many levels. Research has shown positive results in several areas such as of science, education and psychology. These results range from increase cognitive processing, rehabilitation and digital literacy. While it commonly appears to us as a form of entertainment, it branches out into many other fields as well thus making a large impact on the world as a whole.

Gaming has evolved rapidly since its inception. This is largely in part to gaming’s collaborative aspect. Originally gaming was limited between one to two players but as technology has advanced, users around the world are able to connect on a virtual plane. This has furthered globalization as massive multi-player (MMO) games, such as World of Warcraft, have emerged.

With the rising popularity of MMO games, there has been a correlation in the rise of participatory culture as “Convergence Culture” author Henry Jenkins would describe. Gaming has contributed greatly into the creation of Internet culture as well as creating a culture of it’s own. It is not uncommon to find online communities such as FourChan and Reddit are often made up of “gamers.” According to CNET, there are 117 million active gamers in the United States, 56% of which are online gamers. (CNet).

While MMO games have played the most significant role in the gaming world, this is only a portion of the gaming community as noted above. Games like Farmville and QWOP (flash games) have also rose to popularity, stretching the reach of the gaming community to involve less enthusiastic gamers like the average soccer mom.

This expansion of games especially in recent years has shaped Internet culture in a unique way. Internet culture has grown to be largely dependent on the collaborative efforts of its users. As online gamers have grown in numbers both in the gaming and the Internet world, viral media has taken form and rapidly grown. In addition, as gaming is a form of new media, it is often the catalyst and carrier of viral media. Therefore, gaming has played a key role in the evolution of the Internet especially within viral media.

# A Brief History of Gaming

In 1947, Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann created the “cathode ray tube amusement device.” Many games thereafter followed a similar patterns thus leading to Spacewar! in 1961 which is credited as the first widely available and influential video game. (PBS).

Busnell and Dabney later founded Atari, Inc in 1972 and released the ever classic, Pong. Many imitations were created based Pong, which eventually lead to the Video Game Crash of 1977. (PBS).The only remaining companies to survive the home console market were Atari and Magnavox. The crash ended when Japanese publisher Taito created Space Invaders in 1978. This also sparked the “Golden Age of Video Arcade Games.” (Goldberg).

During the Golden Age, video game development rose in addition to sales, which eventually lead to the expansion to home computer gaming. With the success of Apple II, many competitors rose for personal home computer. IBM and Macintosh went back and forth as victors but weren’t completely developed till the 90’s. (PBS).Shareware also sprung about during this period thus leading to one of the first forms of online gaming.

## Rising Popularity of Gaming

While games gained popularity over time, they ultimately became more popular when the massive multi-player online (MMO) feature was introduced. The first MMOs is largely debated; however, their effect was nonetheless prominent.

In the early 90’s, computers had become more advanced which eventually lead to some of the first massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as Ultima Online and Everquest. Shareware also became more prominent during this era as smaller developers became more abundant. Id Software’s first person shooter (FPS) game, Quake, in 1996 had pioneered games on the Internet. (PBS).Development in browser plugins such as Java and Flash expanded the industry for simpler games. Nokia then furthered that expansion with the inclusion of Snake on its line of mobile phones in 1998. (PBS).

Originally role-playing games were the first MMOs but as popularity rose, the industry expanded to other genres such as real time strategy, first person shooter and more. The rise in popularity eventually resulted in consoles integrating the Internet increasing the number of online games and users. They were originally casted as “hard-core games” (a term typically used to described games targeted towards eccentric players) but later went mainstream in late 2003. The Financial Times equated the virtual property of Everquest (at the time, the largest MMO) to result in a per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) of $2,266. This would’ve placed Everquest as the 77th wealthiest nation. Currently World of Warcraft is the most dominant MMO in the world with 11-12 million monthly subscribers worldwide. The online gaming market is worth around $15 billion USD. (Games Brief).

Browser based games also gave rise to the popularity of gaming as browsers began to largely support Flash and Java. Companies redeveloped their games to become more complex especially as technology evolved to later include Ajax – a web language that allows for more complex multiplayer interactions. This also correlated with the rise of amateur developers thus leading to the rise in participatory culture.

Internet connection has become a necessary commodity for all gaming consoles. While consoles still play a significant role in the gaming industry, they’ve dramatically changed. For starters, the major consoles (Wii, Xbox and Playstation) have all expanded towards motion sensing. In addition, game consoles are beginning to market towards a higher purpose. For example, Microsoft’s Kinect has recently begun a campaign, “The Kinect Effect”, that shows how the system has a broad range of areas beyond gaming. The views of gaming consoles are slowly changing as people redefine their purpose.

# Society of Gamers

As games began to appeal to a larger audience, online niche communities grew in numbers. Statistically, there are 117 million active gamers in the United States, 56% of which are online gamers. China, one of the leaders in online gaming users, has 230 million users online alone. (CNet).Now that gaming has become more intertwined with the Internet, it’s not difficult to see how they dominate the online world.

Further proving the extent of gaming, in a 2007 survey in Canada, more people were able to identify Nintendo’s Mario then they could Stephen Harper, Canada’s prime minister. (Edery, 5). In terms of sales, Microsoft’s Halo 3 grossed more in profit ($127 million) within the first 24 hours than the release of the “Harry Potter – The Deathly Hallows” novel. (Edery, 5). In World of Warcraft alone, there are over 10.3 million subscribers as of November 2011. (Video and Computer Games). In terms of online communities, Reddit (over 730k subscribed gaming users) and FourChan (over 77k users) are filled with gamers. This is just one part of the online gaming community; websites like Gamespot, face of the gaming review community, ranks #415 globally among most popular sites (Google is #1). (Alexa).

## Gaming Culture Goes Viral

Gaming has often intertwined with the world of viral media. In fact, in can be argued that gaming plays a big role in viral media. For example, the Internet meme “Leeroy Jenkins” is based on a user (Schulz) screaming out Leeroy Jenkins during a quest in World of Warcraft. The video was originally uploaded to Youtube in 2005 and has accumulated over 28 million views since. (Schulz).This is just the video alone; the meme has spread widely beyond Youtube - merchandise, parodies and remixes among other forms of media. The meme has become more than a simple game reference to a portion of the population, it’s now a common social innuendo. Games are no longer just for playing, but a unique culture in and of itself.

From a user with no MMO experience, Leeroy would seem odd; however, the appeal not only relies on the comedy but the familiarity of the situation. Despite being staged, it occurred while the user was “aggroing.” Aggro is used to describe when a user attracts other monsters/mobs/bad guys which forces the user to either run, fight or die; this is typically done by amateur gamers or newbs. (WoWWiki). The addition of the “Leeroy Jenkins” battle cry adds a comedic effect to an otherwise unfavorable situation. It took something so simple and common in gaming and created a world wide joke.

“Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others.” (Jenkins, 3). Ben Schulz had no (reported) intention of creating a viral video; however, he rose to fame immediately. Many people have taken note of this popularity and are finding ways to make it profitable. Needless to say, most have failed.

## How Gaming Uses Marketing

In simple terms, viral media is a phenomenon of how we create and process content through mass communication. Naturally, businesses want to profit from this fame but fail to see why games are so successful within their market. “The Web has transformed the rules, and you must transform your marketing to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.” (Scott, 8).

The Internet is the fastest way to communicate. Game developing companies have taken advantage of the convenience and have been very successful thus far. While relying little to none on traditional forms of marketing (print ads, T.V. commercials, etc), companies are able to produce original content for their users quickly and exclusively. Especially now that technology has privileged us with opportunity to track how users interact online, companies are able to attend to their user’s needs more easily. “Businesses will live or die on original content. If you are creating truly useful content for customers, you’re going to be seen in a great light and with a great spirit…” (Scott, 22).

Blizzard is the most famous for reaching out to their users. They consistently create a lot of hype for every new game they produce, aggressively advertise online, generate exclusive content and create a culture around the game. They actively participate in promoting their games with every possible measure, especially by creating the culture. Blizzard often prepares for that creation and takes the reins prior to the game even being released. They are in control of what happens to their brand while creating original content. It’s not just a game you play once and never see again; you participate in a virtual community.

This is how marketing online has changed significantly. Originally, it was a one-way interaction where customer complaints often fell on deaf ears. Now on the other hand, it’s all about customer experience. The most successful businesses respond to their customers needs; gaming companies often do this and in fact, encourage users to respond.

This is an unexpected way to create content, which has often gone viral. For example, the online flash game “Press Space to Win (PSTW)” received numerous awards and reviews. One review became so popular, a user by the name of “Rice Pirate New Grounds” created a dramatic reading of the review called “Dot Dot Dot”. The video has generated over a millions views to date, received worldwide acclaim and contributed to the mainstreaming of dramatic readings and kinetic typography.

## Expansion of Gaming Culture

Gaming culture is defined in number of ways and rightly so. It’s not just a form of entertainment, but a form of art and social activity, to say the least. (Shaw). Usually the most active or hard-core gamers often define the resulting culture. In regards to gaming, this would be secluded to MMORPG players; however, this also includes users from simpler games like Farmville or Tetris.

Originally, the overall culture was viewed as “nerdy” or “geeky”, derogatory terms to describe socially awkward individuals who enjoy less popular activities. This view, like all other aspects of gaming, has changed. Nerd is the now the new “cool.” Gaming has become more mainstream and more acceptable within society. This correlates with the rising popularity of games throughout the world. Especially with web series like “The Guild” forming to redefine gaming as a whole, the world is creating a new outlook. While the overall culture has remained the same, the views haven’t. Gaming references are becoming more common in daily life. For example, Angry Birds has remained one of the top mobile games for several years now. While a simple game, merchandise, parodies and other forms have emerged further promoting the game beyond the phone.

# Closing

Gaming is form of new media that enhances story telling through user interactions. Originally seen as a form of entertainment that added no value to one’s being, this perception has changed greatly especially in recent years. It’s no longer just a form of entertainment but an activity that practices various skills.

Since its inception, gaming has slowly created a culture unbeknownst to its participants. Now that mass communication has advanced, the culture has taken a viral effect online and off. Amateur media creations (video, music, etc) have increased rapidly, spreading across the world. As more shared media is created, the culture forms more vividly. Gaming companies have taken note of this effect and participated themselves. This contribution increases the participatory culture behind each game and the gaming community as a whole. Simply put, the Internet is filled with content geared towards everyone.

While gamers are typically defined by the games they play and to the degree they play, gaming has become so popular and advanced that this now includes the every day individual. It’s not just a society of “nerds.” As such, gaming references in social situations have become common. Gaming is slowly intertwining with every day life. While it hasn’t reached “Jersey Shore” status, gaming has increasingly become more viral. "What constitutes activity in the datasphere is only limited by the number of ways a person can be exposed to or iterate viruses. As the datasphere grows, each of us come into contact with more of our viral culture. The media promotes a new kind of intimacy, and no one can escape the flood." (Rushkoff, 58).

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