

Chapter 7

Player Agency, Team Responsibility, and Self-Initiated Change: An Apprentice's Learning Trajectory and Peer Mentoring in Esports

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ABSTRACT

An important aspect of what constitutes beginning gamers' learning trajectories is guidance from experienced players. However, there is little educational research on these processes within a competitive gaming scene. In this chapter, the authors analyse the mentor-apprentice relationship in a team in the multiplayer FPS CS:GO within an esports and educational context. By assuming a dialogic approach to agency and meaning making, they analyse how the team orients towards the apprentice's agency and how the apprentice responds to these orientations. The other players' orientations towards the apprentice's decisions indicate that support diminishes, and responsibility and expectations grow over time. Communication and collaboration appear to be an inherent part of functioning as a team and teaching others in the team, and all players are expected to develop agency and reach a level of independence. In the chapter, they show and discuss how this happens.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7069-2.ch007

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a competent esports player of online multiplayer games involves complex social processes and networks of online and offline life where the player is socialised into social norms and expectations (Gilje & Silseth, 2019). In-and-through this socialisation process, “novice” players have been shown to rely on guidance from more experienced “expert” players (Rambusch, Jakobsson & Pargman, 2007; N. Taylor, 2016). In other words, an important aspect of what constitutes players’ learning trajectories is guidance from experienced players. This connects to the value of communication and collaboration skills, which appears to be important for esports players to learn when the games, as part of the esports scene, become more competitive (Rambusch et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the research on novice and expert relationships often focuses on an idealised version of an ‘expert’ gamer and the experts’ actions and decisions as the norm for how the game is supposed to be played. In addition, there is also a tendency, when studying how novices learn, to focus more on the agency of the ‘experts’ or on how ‘experts’ facilitate the learning and teaching of novices (Kirschner & Williams, 2013).

Scholars have suggested that games have motivational effects and provide opportunities for active engagement with knowledge, which prepares players for future learning (Gee, 2003). Therefore, in educational research there has been considerable interest in the implementation of games in instructional designs (Arnseth, Hanghøj & Silseth, 2018; de Freitas, 2018; Gros, 2007; Shaffer, 2006; Squire & Barab, 2004; Wouters & van Oostendorp, 2013). However, there is a need to better understand commercial games from an educational perspective (Barr, 2019). Commercial games have also been shown to be a social learning platform, which may improve collaboration skills and other advanced competences (e.g., Barr, 2018; 2019; Gee, 2017; Steinkuehler, 2006). Nevertheless, there is little educational research on how these competences are cultivated and employed within the competitive esports gaming scene (N. Taylor, 2016).

In this chapter, we study participants’ online in-game interaction, with a focus on an apprentice’s agency (Rainio, 2008) as part of an esports team and how collaboration skills and other advanced competences are developed within the team. We analyse an apprentice’s trajectory towards becoming an independent player and part of the team while learning to play the game together with the team. The team includes a team leader with vast individual knowledge, a higher ranking and skilful gaming performance who will be referred to as the “mentor” (Hatifnatten)¹. All teammates function as mentors; however, Hatifnatten has received an explicit role as mentor for the apprentice. The player being referred to as the “apprentice” (Lux) is the newest member of the team who had to be ‘prepped’ before joining and who is, in interviews, referred to as the one with the least experience playing the multiplayer first person shooter (FPS) *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO, Valve Corporation & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012). By assuming a dialogic approach to meaning making, agency and learning (Rainio, 2008), we will analyse how the team, as a whole, orients towards the apprentice’s development of agency and how the apprentice responds to these orientations.

ESPORTS, AGENCY AND DIALOGUE

The growing esports scene has turned games that used to be a spare time activity into professional and educational contexts. In these contexts, learning is actively co-constructed in the in-game interaction with both the game itself, as well as with co-players (Rusk & Ståhl, 2020; Rusk et al., 2020; Ståhl &

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