

---

# Understanding the Meta-experience of Casual Games

**Carolyn Wei**

Google, Inc.  
1600 Amphitheater Parkway  
Mountain View, CA 94043 USA  
weicar@google.com

*Carolyn Wei is a Senior User Experience Researcher at Google. She studies users and shares insights to make Google's real-time communication products like Hangouts more usable, useful, and delightful. Her research background is in computer-mediated communication in consumer and enterprise settings. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington.*

**David A. Huffaker**

Google, Inc.  
1600 Amphitheater Parkway  
Mountain View, CA 94043 USA  
huffaker@google.com

*David Huffaker is a Quantitative User Experience Researcher at Google, where he examines large-scale social behavior in Google+. His research background is in computer-mediated communication in online communities and video games. He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University.*

**Abstract**

In this position paper, we argue that casual gamers can be segmented by "meta-experiences" into a typology that could inform game platform design. These meta-experiences include out-of-game immersion, social layering, and game discovery. We discuss the interviews and video diaries that have helped shape the typology.

**Keywords**

Video games, casual games, game platforms

**Introduction**

Social network sites like Facebook and Google+ have become increasingly popular sources of casual games. Play is still the key action in these casual games, but we must also consider the "meta-experiences" that are outside of game play. In this position paper, we describe an open research need for a typology of gamers that encapsulates these meta-experiences.

We focus on three types of meta-experiences: (a) *out-of-game immersion*, where users further enjoy the game experience through research, fan communities and spectatorship; (b) *social layering*, where users customize social components based on game play preferences; and (c) *game discovery*, where users find

new titles depending on their game repertoire and willingness to expend effort. Understanding these meta-experiences can help us design better gaming experiences.

### **Previous Work on Types of Gamers**

Much of the games research to date has focused on more “hardcore” games such World of Warcraft or Xbox Live. More recently, researchers have acknowledged that casual gamers can be as intense and fanatical as hardcore players [3, 4]. The stereotype of the casual gamer as middle-aged woman playing Bejeweled in her spare time between chores is clearly inadequate.

Most of the work that has been done on gamer typology has focused on their motivations for play. Bartle [1] developed the seminal typology with four player types (Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, Killers). Yee [7] elaborated on Bartle’s research by fleshing out the achievement, social, and immersion components and suggesting that motivations could overlap between gamer types. Other typologies have also been defined based on play motivation [6].

Although this work has been quite useful for game researchers, we argue that gamers can be segmented beyond motivation. Besides expanding game theory, a working typology of casual gamers based on meta-experiences could be a useful tool for making user-centered design decisions and could be leveraged to create better affordances in social network games for extending the immersive experience, maintaining social connections, and introducing more games to people.

Our approach to defining a typology is grounded in mixed methods. Mixed methods are vital for

understanding social phenomena on a large scale, and allows confirmation of findings from individual research activities [2]. We have conducted four studies to date to shape this typology: (a) in-home **interviews** of “hardcore” Xbox Live and World of Warcraft gamers; (b) **video diary studies** of casual gamers who play on Facebook, G+, as well as mobile and tablet devices; (c) a **survey** of casual gamer motivations and attitudes; and (d) **user logs analysis** of G+ gamers.

### **Towards a Casual Gamer Typology**

Our research evolved from exploratory analysis and themes derived from the interviews, to confirmatory analysis using the survey and logs data. In this paper, we present the exploratory side, in which we noted three consistent themes, all of which involved a user experience outside of the actual game play. In our interviews, the hardcore gamers extended their experiences outside the game itself and discussed the social benefits of interacting with other gamers. We used the video diaries to better assess these experiences, then used surveys and logs analysis to see if these activities are common across the larger user population. We make the following recommendations based on these meta-experiences.

**Platforms should provide more out-of-game immersion experiences.** Most of our participants enjoy extending their game experience through research (i.e., how to get better, or complete a difficult task), engaging in a fan community (i.e., discussing tips, engaging in trade), or as a spectator (i.e., watching videos of great players or live tournaments).

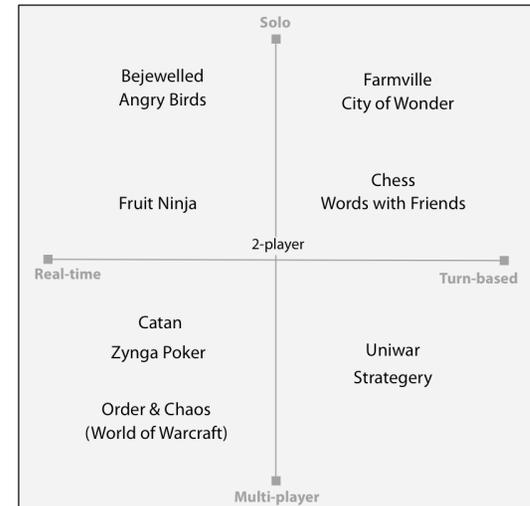
However, players vary in their needs for these experiences. A game like Order & Chaos (a MMORPG)

can benefit from a fan community to share lore, item locations or combat tips, while Angry Birds can use more lightweight tutorials on how to beat advanced levels. In other words, the complexity of the games that players prefer can provide scope for the amount of research, community support and spectator opportunities.

**The social experience must vary according to players' game preferences.** Many hardcore gamers discussed the social aspects of gaming at length, not only in terms of collaborating with others, but also through out-of-game communication and scheduling, support networks and even a need to meet in real-life. As we discussed such social mechanisms with casual gamers, we noted important differences in their social needs and argue that social layering should vary from leaderboards or notification systems to more advanced communication and coordination mechanisms.

For example, as Figure 1 shows, casual games vary in how many other players are involved (e.g., Bejeweled is 1-player, while Zynga Poker is multiplayer) and how the time is interwoven (e.g., Catan is real-time, while Words with Friends is turn-based). The figure also harkens to the design constraints and affordances based on game preference; the social experience for real-time multiplayer games include real-time communication supplemented with asynchronous messaging, scheduling systems, and ways to easily form groups. By contrast, two-player turn-based games need to support asynchronous communication, and provide easy ways to invite others. Games like Farmville, which allow users to gift and reciprocate, might extend social offerings by adding more group-

based or collaborative tasks (i.e., build a farmhouse together).

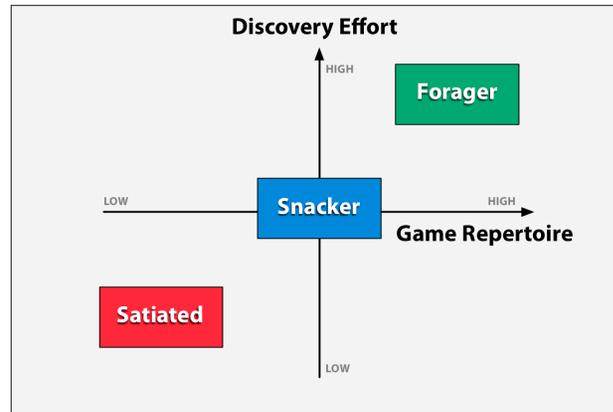


**Figure 1.** Model of social complexity for various types of casual games. Games vary in how many players are involved, and whether they are played in real-time or not, requiring different social experiences.

**Platforms must use different game discovery mechanisms based on player types.** For both casual and hardcore gamers we learned that players vary in the amount of effort they are willing to put into finding new games. They also vary in how diverse their gaming repertoire is—some players remain loyal to a single game for years, while others are constantly looking for new games and content to consume.

We framed our understanding of game discovery in terms of information foraging (Pirolli & Card 1999),

where users make and constantly refine decisions about where, when, and how they find information. As shown in Figure 2, “foragers” represent gamers who are constantly looking for new games and will spend a lot of effort to find them; more sporadic game discovery is similar to information snacking, where users look in bursts and as needed. Gamers who don’t look for games at all might be described as satiated with their current repertoire of games.



**Figure 2.** Diagram of player typologies based on discovery effort and game repertoire, based on information foraging theories.

In conclusion, we believe that game user experience extends beyond the log-in/log-out boundaries of the game. “Meta-experience” starts to hint at the blurring edges between casual gameplay and the rest of a user’s life and lets us add nuance to existing gamer typologies that are primarily based on play motivations. By considering a user’s desire to immerse in a game, need for sociability, and willingness to discover new

games, we are in essence thinking about how users might be motivated to “play” outside the game.

Understanding meta-experiences of casual gamers helps us design richer game experiences on platforms like social network sites. This knowledge can create social network sites that better surround games and provide a more seamless play experience, whether that play be in-game or real life.

## References

- [1] Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: players who suit MUDs. *Journal of Virtual Environments*, 1.
- [2] Brewer & A. Hunter (1989). *Multimethod Research: A Synthesis of Styles*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- [3] Consalvo, M. (2009). Hardcore casual: game culture Return(s) to Ravenhearst. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '09)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 50-54.
- [4] Juul, J. (2010). *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [5] Pirolli, P., & Card, S. (1999). Information foraging. *Psychological Review* 106(4): 643-675.
- [6] Schuurman, D., De Moor, K., De Marez, L., & Van Looy, J. (2008). Fanboys, competitors, escapists and time-killers: A typology based on gamers' motivations for playing video games. In *Proceedings of the 3rd international conference on Digital Interactive Media in Entertainment and Arts (DIMEA '08)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 46-50.
- [7] Yee, N. (2006). Motivations for Play in Online Games. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 9, 6 (2007), 772-775.