Adult social engagement through video game community

Kanyarat Worachat*, Kullatip Satararuji†

Graduate School of Communication Arts and Management Innovation, National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok 10240, Thailand

Article Info

Abstract

This qualitative research explores an adult's process of social engagement that occurs when playing digital video games by conducting in-depth interviews with 32 informants aged between 40–72 years old, and a focus group interview with a group of 4 informants who have been active members of game groups for more than a year. The research found that the process of social engagement through digital gaming comprises of 7 steps starting from the player's motivation to play video games, immersion of game engagement, communication via in-game activities, sharing of emotions while playing games together, creating group communication channels, doing collective activities outside the game world, and finally developing a real social group. The social engagement process leads to 5 different types of adult game players; Solo player, Pseudo solo player, Local guild player, Online guild player, and Social player. There are 4 factors that influence an adult's social engagement process, which are the adult's characteristics, the game's communication and social features, the players' collective goals, and shared emotions while playing games together.

© 2022 Kasetsart University.

Introduction

Playing video games is one of the most popular activities which attract a wide range of players from children to adults. It serves as a form of modern communication, allowing players to interact with each other and create virtual communities across the globe. Players exchange their experiences and interests through each player's identity that has been newly created for game's online society (Klangthong, 2016).

Previously there have been a lot of researchers contributing to studying video game-related topics which target children and young people. However, the growth of the aging population has raised the effort to increase research on the relation between middle aged or older adults and games. Such research topics are, for example, game design for developing an elder's health (Gerling, Schild, & Masuch, 2010). Some studies demonstrate that playing games can develop social relations among family members (Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2016), or create a sense of belonging to a group (Vella et al., 2019). This social interaction in a game community is gaining more attention as some scholars have confirmed that social engagement is one of the important factors for middle-aged and older adults to maintain good physical and mental health (Khamkhong, 2010; Park, 2009;

Tomaka, Thompson, & Palacious, 2006), raising curiosity towards the possibility of digital gaming as a tool to foster an adult's social relationship.

Since the world has changed rapidly, adult gamers have adapted to digital society before entering the elderly stage. Meanwhile there are groups of middle age adults and elders who are slowly distanced from society according to the changing in people's way of live. They may become isolated in their homes and have fewer social roles after retirement. Examining adult gamers and their social relationship through digital games would benefit these middle aged and older adults in developing social skills in the digital age. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on mid-adult engagement to game communities, especially in Thailand. Therefore, the objective of this research was to study the process and formation of an adult's social engagement that emerges from playing video games. The results of this research may assist a government agency in charge of supporting older adults, in developing middle-aged and older adults' social skills through gaming and benefit the game business to design games suitable for this age group.

Literature Review

Middle Adulthood Theories

Adults in middle age are in a situation where their physical conditions begin to decline, while their emotional development will have become more rational. In terms of social development, they mostly dedicate themselves to work duties and family matters according to Basseches (1984, as cited in Chularut, 2005). Therefore, it may be difficult to start new relationships with new friends. Meanwhile Erikson (1968) believed that at the age of around 40, people enter their seventh normative stage, which he called 'generativity versus stagnation'. At the generativity stage, middle-aged adults will act with generosity towards younger people. They pass on knowledge and experiences to younger generations. On the other hand, middle-aged adults in the stagnation stage will become self-interested, which may lead to despair in their elderly period. The end of middle adulthood is the stage of declining from work and family responsibilities. However, the activity theory by Havighurst (1963) stated that they still need to join social activities either by doing fun activities with their families and friends or through community work, so they can raise their feelings of self-worth.

Social Features and Social Interactive Function of Video Games

King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths (2010) referred to game's social features as the socializing aspects of video games. The features demonstrate how players can communicate with other players in both online and offline games. There are 4 sub-features under the social features category which are social utility features, social formation and institutional features, leader board features, and support network features.

Social utility features enable players to engage in social interaction with other players; for example, using text-based messaging, emoticons, acronyms and slang or their virtual avatars' gestures to communicate with others. Some massive multiplayer online games, such as Realm of Valor (RoV), allow players to talk with voice. Meanwhile social formation and institutional features, such as guilds or clans, are the primary institution to which players may belong, mainly for the purpose of playing the game cooperatively and sharing the rewards of playing among members of the guild.

Next, leader board features use player tracking systems to monitor a player's statistics and progress in the game in relation to other players. Leader boards are updated regularly, which may encourage players to play continuously over long periods to compete with other players for higher ranks. Finally, support network features assist the players to play more efficiently, for example, Facebook fan page, Discord chat servers, internet forums and game magazines. These support networks can provide knowledge of a video game's design and optimal strategies for players to overcome obstacles while playing.

Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) explained the relationship between social interactive functions and complexity states of video games. When playing simple games, a player can relax and play without much thought or strategizing. On the other hand, when playing games with more complex systems, players must concentrate and strategize heavily from the beginning to the end. Video games with low social interaction levels can be played by only one or a few players. Meanwhile, games with a high level of social interaction require good teamwork and cooperative planning. The researchers classified video games into 4 groups: simple playing games with low level of social interaction, such as Puzzle or Platform games; complex playing games with low level of social interaction, such as Shooter (Solo), and Role Playing Games (RPGs); simple playing games with high level of social interaction, such as Social media

games and Party games; and complex playing games with high level of social interaction, such as Sport, Strategy games, and MMORPG.

The Concept of Group and Social Engagement Theory

Feldman and Arnold (1983) explained that being a group has to have a common goal or interest, and its own norms. Members would have to develop social interaction and emotional engagement with others, together with performing group roles (Hartley, 2002).

The word 'engagement' has been used widely in the social sciences, for example Macgowan (1997) gathered good points of each previous framework and designed his 'Engagement Dimensions'. Johnston (2018) also tried to explain states of engagement at a collective level. She mentioned five factors of social engagement which are orientation, experience, participation, collective action and intention. This research employed Macgowan's engagement dimensions together with Johnston's 5 factors of social engagement as a direction for a new social group which originated from playing video games (Table 1).

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research method. Data were collected through in-depth and focus group interviews. The goal was to examine social relationship formation and social engagement process of middle-aged adults through playing video games. The data collection period began in April 2019 and ended in October 2019.

Data Collection Tools

Both in-depth and focus group interviews were conducted using open-ended questions in the format of a semi-structured question guide, to ensure that the informants can freely express their views in regards to playing games. There were three main topics examined in the interviews. The first topic was created to study informants' gaming behavior. Examples of questions include 'How long have you been playing video games?', 'What games have you played recently?', 'How do you like the game?', and 'Why do you play games?'

The second topic was created to study informants' social relationship through playing games. Examples of questions include 'Who do you usually play with?', 'Are you a part of a team or gaming group?', 'Did you know other players in your team before?', and 'How do you communicate with other players?'

The third topic was created to study social engagement at group level. Examples of open-ended questions include 'How was the group formed?', 'How do members communicate with each other?', 'How do members share information or experience in gaming?', 'What topics do group members usually talk about?', and 'Who takes the lead role in the group?'

Population, Informants and Sampling Frame

The population was adult Thais aged over 40 years old, both male and female, who play at least one specific digital game.

Table 1 Engagement dimension in game group (Modified from Macgowan's engagement dimension, 1997, and Johnston's 5 factors of social engagement, 2018)

Engagement dimensions	Direction	Engagement dimensions within game group
Attendance (Participation)	Attends group activities until the end.	Game player joins game group.
Contributing (Experience, Participation)	Be part of conversation or group activities.	Members exchange their experience and cooperate in playing game.
Relating to leader and members (Participation, Collective action)	Members support leader's work. They have conversation with others and keep good relationship.	Members support the group leader for game activities, and contact each other via in-game communication channel or other channels regularly.
Contracting (Orientation, Intention)	Members agree to group policy, activity, norm, and group direction.	Members create group rules officially and unofficially and accept the group rules.
Working on own problems and others' problems (Experience, Collective action)	Members realize and manage problems purposely, meanwhile encourage and support other members to solve their own problems successfully.	Members pay attention and support each other to solve problems about playing game or other problems.

Informants and Sampling Methodology

This research employed the snowball sampling technique as the sampling methodology for the interviews. The informants were identified from relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. They were also asked to identify others who fit the criteria. As a result, there were 32 informants for the in-depth interview. The group of informants were aged between 40–72 years, and had played games for more than one year.

The focus group interview is defined to examine the formation of gamers' groups (study social engagement). Therefore, additional conditions were as follows:

A total of 4–6 participants would be selected for the group interview. Participants must belong to one of the video game groups that have existed for over a year, but they do not necessarily need to be members of the same group. As a result, there were 4 participants who agreed to join the focus group.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data were collected from in-depth and focus group interviews. Typological analysis, non-theory-based event analysis, and analytic induction were used to analyzed participants' social engagement from playing games. Research findings were discussed based on theories and relevant researches.

Results

There were totally 36 participants (19 females and 17 males) involved in this study. Participant biodata indicated that 9 of them had worked at a middle level or higher, 4 were investors and business owners, 6 were retired officers, and the rest included government officers, company employees, freelancers and housewives. The research results were divided into 3 parts: game playing behavior, formation of social engagement through video games, and process of social engagement through video games.

Game Playing Behavior

Most of the informants played many games at the same time. Candy Crush had the largest number of players (11 informants), followed by Homescapes, Hay Day, Pokemon Go, and RoV respectively.

Among 32 informants from in-depth interviews, 14 admitted that they played video games alone and 18 said they preferred playing in a group. The research indicated that entertainment was the main motivation for those who prefer playing games alone (to relieve stress, to kill time, to enjoy playing, and to avoid boring routines). Meanwhile, success in game competitions and social relations were two major motivations for gamers who preferred playing in a group.

Formation of Social Engagement through Video Games

The analysis of social engagement through game playing could be further classified into five types as explained below.

'Game Engagement without Social Engagement' Type

The characteristic of players fitting this type can be noted as a single player who plays video games alone without having any interaction (through the game or otherwise) with other players. These gamers prefer selecting games that are conducive to completing missions alone. The research found 5 informants whose social behaviors belong to this group. Adult players in this group can be referred to as a "*Solo player*".

'Limited Social Engagement' Type

This type of game players prefers to play games alone (without being part of a team). They might perform game activities with people in their social circle such as relatives, friends, and work colleagues. They might ask for heart stickers, share games, exchange items or join some missions with someone they just encountered in a game field but will not communicate further to extend their relationship and do not form groups to play the game. The research found 9 informants following this game playing behavior. Adult players in this group may be called "*Pseudo solo player*".

'Closed Social Engagement' Type

The players fitting this type usually know each other before forming a group or teaming up to play a game together. Players as members of the team communicate regularly and help each other playing the game. They exchange in-game items, give away energy to teammates and set up their team to compete with other teams matched by the game's systems. These people would talk using their phone, or through social media. "*Local guild player*" is the given name for players fitting the 'Closed Social Engagement' type. The study found 9 informants to fall into this category.

'Virtual Social Engagement' Type

The main characteristic for this type is the formation of group with players who are not originally acquaintances through the game's systems. The goal is to form a team that has a common goal in fulfilling objectives within the game. The team members communicate using the tools provided in the game or use other external communication channels such as social media. The formation of such group might only be a one-time thing or can be continuous in order to continue accomplishing in-game objectives. There is no effort to build relationships outside the game. There were 6 informants found in this category. An adult player whose social engagement behavior belongs to this group is defined as "*Online guild player*".

'Real Social Engagement' Type

The notable characteristic of this type is that they form real world social groups based on their online communities. Players begin with playing the game and join groups with other unknown players. At first, group members communicate via in-game systems and social media for the game-related purposes only. The relationship of the group members gradually develops to getting to know each other in a real capacity. They, together, create in-group social rules, share experiences and do collective activities outside the game world. Finally, the virtual social group turns into a real world social group. The research found 3 informants belonged to this category. We called this type of gamer a '*Social player*'.

Middle-Aged Adults' Process of Social Engagement through Video Games

The result from focus group interviewing 4 informants demonstrates that the adult's process of social engagement through video games consisted of 7 steps as follow:

Motivation to play game: It is the beginning of the social engagement process. When the middle-aged adult player feels motivated, he/she, then, starts to play.

Immersion of game engagement: When the middle-aged player experiences feelings of attachment to the game, he/she will continue playing and complete in-game tasks in each step. The results show that the research informants may engage with the in-game's environment, characters, gameplay systems, or the community surrounding the game.

However, middle-aged adult player whose feeling does not align with the game may experience boredom and finally stop playing.

Communication via game activities: The middle-aged adult player decides to communicate with other players via in-game activities in order to complete in-game quests. Different types of in-game quests require different levels of communication and interactions between players which depend on the social characteristics of each game. However, there are also some players who can play without communicating with other players.

Sharing of emotions: The result shows that middle-aged players may share emotions when they cooperate during in-game missions. Players may share feelings of joy due to perceived success in achieving in-game objectives, or sadness because of perceived in-game failure. Sharing emotions can lead to fostering a sense of belonging to the group.

Construction of a group communication channel: When the sense of belonging to the group emerges, the next step is to construct the group's communication channel. Group members create their own communication channels to share information. Social media, such as Facebook, LINE, or Discord are examples of group communication channels. However, at this step communication channels are used only for in-game purposes.

Collective activities outside game world: The research found that a while after joining a game group, players begin to do activities outside the game world with other members, such as having lunch, or doing social activities. Rather than knowing only the character represented in-game, they reveal their real-world identities to others.

Construction of a new community outside game world: At the 7th step, a new real-world social group that originated from the in-game group is completely developed. Apart from communicating regularly and doing activities together, both inside and outside the game world, members of the group together set their own rules and all group members obey.

Discussion

The interest aspect in the process of adult's social engagement through video game is the reason that drives middle-aged adult gamers to develop social engagement in different forms. There are four factors that influence or hinder the development of social engagement, which are discussed below.

Firstly, social characteristic of middle-aged adults is one of the factors that support or hinder the decision to join a group or interact with other players. The research result indicates that many middle-aged adult gamers

usually have work at a middle administrative or higher level that they are responsible for. It is more difficult for them to make appointments to play game with others and work as a team. Thus, they usually select games that can be played alone or games that only require them to occasionally join online. This is in line with Basseches (1984), as cited in Chularut (2005) explaining that adults dedicate their time and effort to their work and family. They might spend less time with friends and hardly build new relationships. The research also found that some adult players maintain a sense of personal space and are cautious of doing joint in-game missions with unknown players. However, some of the adults are more open to new friendships. This might be explained by the activity theory by Havighurst (1963), that there are adult players who still need to join social activities. Thus, it is easy for them to accept a new relationship through game play in contrast to adults with stagnation (Erikson, 1968), who may face difficulty in making new friendship.

Secondly, the research findings indicate that the top most popular games were Candy Crush, Pokémon GO, RoV, Homescapes, and Hay Day. These games are examples of modern games that allow gamers to communicate and play together as explained by King et al. (2010) regarding social features of game. The results are also in line with Granic et al. (2014)'s explanation about type of games that facilitate high social interaction and type of games with low interaction. The characteristics of the game's social features and communication functions are therefore an important variable that has an impact on social engagement among adult gamers.

Next, playing games with the common shared goal within the group can lead to the development of engagement among members of the group as Feldman and Arnold (1983) explained, whereby a group has to have a common goal or interest. The research findings indicate that middle-aged adult gamers who prefer to play alone just to relieve stress or for entertainment purposes with no other expectations are not motivated to develop relationships with other players. Meanwhile adults who prefer playing in groups or have a serious in-game objective that requires the cooperation of other players will socialize. For example, an in-game competition to receive reward to level up can lead to cooperation between players.

The final discussion topic is about feelings and shared emotions in doing joint missions. Gamers coming together to fulfill in-game mission objectives may create shared emotions and feelings that lead to higher social engagement. The research findings indicate that groups of players who cooperate together in order to achieve in-game objectives form an emotional connection and share feelings of happiness in victory and sadness in defeat. This sense inevitably results in engagement and feelings of in-group in a way fostering the sense of belonging, which is in line with Vella et al. (2019), who found that playing games results in feelings of being part of a group.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the process of building social engagement within digital games, there has been a development in five types of social engagement. Each type of player can then be classified as solo player, pseudo solo player, local guild player, online guild player, and social player respectively. The study might be explained with the model shown in Figure 1.

The research result can be applied in various fields. Firstly, in terms of psychological benefit, the government agency can use digital games as a tool to develop social skills for the elderly, as the research findings found that groups in various forms can emerge through playing games. Furthermore, the community management can also use the research findings to develop relationships among community members through playing games. It can also be used as a means to alleviate loneliness among the old family members, who might have to spend time alone while their children go out and work.

In terms of game business, as today adult and elderly gamers have increased in number, there is still a gap in the development of this demographic. The research results enable businesses to better understand adult's game playing behavior and the characteristics of different player groups, which would help businesses to develop successful business strategies. The research findings can also benefit game developers to create suitable games that are more attractive to adults.

It should be noted that this research only studied social behaviors of the group of Thai middle adults while playing games. Cultural differentiation might be counted on when applying the research result to other countries. It is also recommended to expand the study on a larger scale.

Conflict of Interest
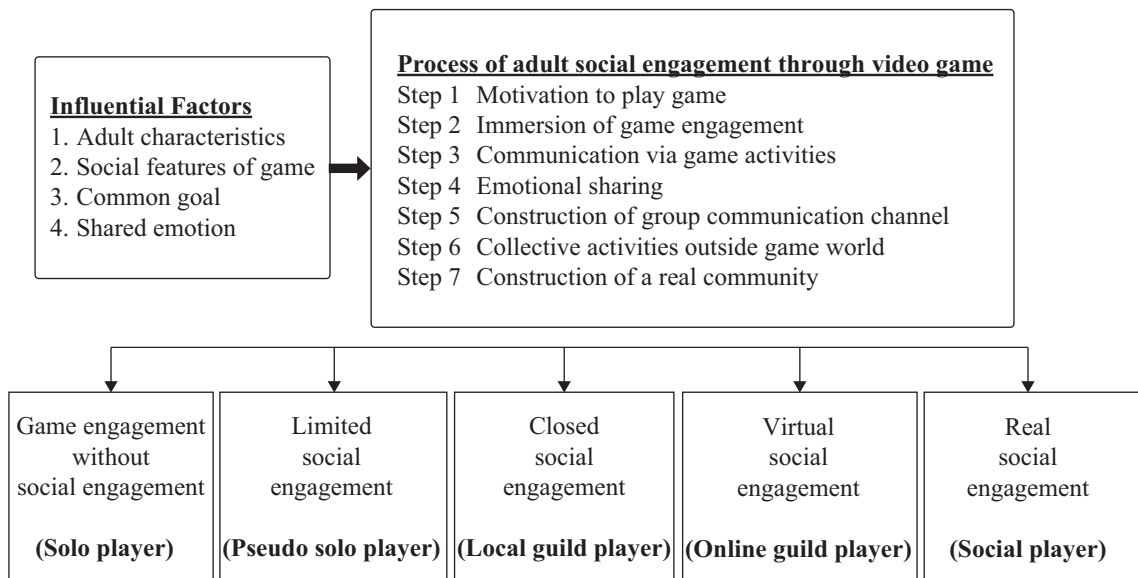
There is no conflict of interest.

Influential Factors
1. Adult characteristics
2. Social features of game
3. Common goal
4. Shared emotion

Process of adult social engagement through video game
Step 1 Motivation to play game
Step 2 Immersion of game engagement
Step 3 Communication via game activities
Step 4 Emotional sharing
Step 5 Construction of group communication channel
Step 6 Collective activities outside game world
Step 7 Construction of a real community

Game engagement without social engagement (Solo player)	Limited social engagement (Pseudo solo player)	Closed social engagement (Local guild player)	Virtual social engagement (Online guild player)	Real social engagement (Social player)

Figure 1   The model of adult social engagement through video game community

References

Basseches, M. (1984). *Dialectical thinking and adult development*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Chularut, P. (2005). *Educational psychology* (Thai Edition). Bangkok, Thailand: Srinakharinwirot University. [in Thai]

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.

Feldman, D. C., & Arnold, H. J. (1983). *Managing individual and group behavior in organizations*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Gerling, K. M., Schild, J., & Masuch, M. (2010). *Exergame design for elderly users: The case study of silver balance*. Paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology. Taipei, Taiwan.

Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. M. E. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist*, *69*(1), 66–78. doi: 10.1037/a0034857

Hartley, P. (2002). *Interpersonal communication* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

Havighurst, R. J. (1963). Successful aging. In R. H. Williams, C. Tibbitts, & W. Donahue (Eds.), *Processes of aging: social and psychological perspectives volume 1* (pp. 299–320). New York, NY: Atherton Press.

Johnston, K. A. (2018). Chapter 2: Toward a theory of social engagement. In K. A. Johnston & M. Taylor (Eds.), *The handbook of communication engagement* (1st ed., pp.17–32). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Khamkhong, D. (2010). *Factors affecting quality of life of elderly in Lumsinth sub district, Srenagarine district, Pathalung province*. (Unpublished master's thesis). Thaksin University, Songkhla Thailand. [in Thai]

King, D., Delfabbro, P., & Griffiths, M. (2010). Video game structural characteristics: A new psychological taxonomy. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *8*(1), 90–106. doi: 10.1007/s11469-009-9206-4

Klangthong, S. (2016). *The Construction of online game virtual communities in Thailand*. (Unpublished master's thesis). National Institution of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand. [in Thai]

Macgowan, M. J. (1997). A measure of engagement for social group work: The groupwork engagement measure (GEM). *Journal of Social Service Research*, *23*(2), 17–37. doi: 10.1300/J079v23n02_02

Osmanovic, S., & Pecchioni, L. (2016). Beyond entertainment: Motivations and outcomes of video game playing by older adults and their younger family members. *Games and Culture*, *11*(1–2), 130–149. doi: 10.1177/1555412015602819

Park, N. S. (2009). The relationship of social engagement to psychological well-being of older adults in assisted living facilities. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *28*(4), 461–481. doi: 10.1177/0733464808328606

Tomaka, J., Thompson, S., & Palacios, R. (2006). The relation of social isolation, loneliness, and social support to disease outcomes among the elderly. *Journal of Aging and Health*, *18*(3), 359–384. doi: 10.1177/0898264305280993

Vella, K., Johnson, D., Cheng, V. W. S., Davenport, T., Mitchell, J., Klarkowski, M., & Phillips, C. (2019). A sense of belonging: Pokémon GO and Social connectedness. *Games and Culture*, *14*(6), 583–603. doi: 10.1177/1555412017719973