



## Full length article

# The social implications of casual online gaming: Examining the effects of competitive setting and performance outcome on player perceptions



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## ABSTRACT

The theory of bounded generalized reciprocity has recently been applied to the study of video games, particularly those that offer cooperative and competitive settings. Emphasizing casual online gameplay, this study investigates how individuals respond to manipulated performance feedback in either a competitive or cooperative game play setting. An interaction between competitive setting and performance feedback was detected on measures of interpersonal liking and perceived competence. Specifically, perceptions of partners and competitors were relatively favorable in the cooperation/success and competition/failure conditions, respectively. On the other hand, participants rated their partners and competitors less favorably during cooperative failure and competitive success, possibly reflecting a unique self-serving bias. The results also suggest that individuals in a cooperative setting experience greater enjoyment than those in a competitive setting. The effectiveness of the two manipulations in this study may also have important implications for the design of serious or educational games, which often have the goal of strategically motivating players in an attempt to promote desired outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Casual games have become one of the most popular genres of video and computer games on the market, according to the NDP group's recent retail report (ESA, 2015). This popularity is often attributed to some key characteristics. First, their ubiquity is enabled by the ease with which users can access these games through a variety of mobile and wireless devices. Second, casual games are typically easy to learn (Juul, 2010) and offer relatively short levels/challenges (compared to traditional console games), allowing users to engage without a substantial time commitment (Slutsky, 2011). Third, many casual social games afford a level of convenience insofar as they can be played asynchronously, meaning they do not require players to be in the same session at the same time. Finally, casual games provide an informal venue for social competition, allowing for personal and social comparisons to occur (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006; Vorderer, Hartmann, &

Klimmt, 2003).

As a result of these affordances, casual games provide users easy access to a unique blend of competition and social interaction (Whitbourne, Ellenberg, & Akimoto, 2013), producing scenarios in which user experience is influenced both by their overall performance and the manner in which they relate with others. Therefore, an individual's performance may be directly affected by the other players involved, creating a scenario in which reciprocity toward a teammate is often based solely upon their performance. However, researchers have only begun to investigate the affect that these interactions are having on users and their attitudes both toward the game itself and the other users they are interacting with.

Recent research has found support for applying the theory of bounded generalized reciprocity (BGR; Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999) as a means of explaining the relationship between/within in-group and out-group players, specifically regarding post-game observations and behaviors toward other players (Velez, 2015; Velez, Greitemeyer, Whitaker, Ewoldsen, & Bushman, 2014). BGR predicts that in-group members are expected to reciprocate positive behaviors towards one another in an effort to protect and further one's self-interests (Velez, 2015; Yamagishi et al., 1999). However, research in this area has just begun to emerge, and those

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that have tested BGR in this context have not taken into account player performance (e.g. in-game success, points accumulated, and levels achieved) and its potential influence on how others are perceived.

The vast majority of casual gaming experiences include at least one performance metric output (e.g., score, points, time) that help gamers make sense of their abilities relative to other players. Previous literature has suggested that such performance feedback may be the most valued piece of information in games because it serves as a marker for an individual's relative success or failure (Velez, 2012). Therefore, it stands to reason that user performance may also influence how they perceive other players involved in the gaming experience. For example, an individual who participates in a competitive setting and fails may feel differently toward another player as compared to an individual who cooperates on the same task and succeeds (Wolosin, Sherman, & Till, 1973). Thus, an individual's perception of the game, self, and other, may be relative to the specific social characteristics of the game play setting itself, such as, whether or not they were participating in a competitive or cooperative setting (e.g., Eastin, 2007; Ewoldsen et al., 2012; Schmierbach, Xu, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Dardis, 2012), in conjunction with performance. Therefore, in addition to providing an opportunity for social comparison through performance feedback, games also provide a forum for users to make and potentially express interpersonal judgments about the other users they are playing with.

Furthermore, the level of enjoyment experienced as a result of gameplay may be influenced by these characteristics, such as: performance (Jin, 2012; Schmierbach, Chung, Wu, & Kim, 2014), how they participate with others (Schmierbach et al., 2012), or potentially, a combination of these factors. This study sets out to test the theory of bounded generalized reciprocity by examining the potential for a unique interaction between performance feedback and game play settings in social gaming. To test this relationship, the current study employs a 2 X 2 experimental design in which participants are first placed in either a competitive or cooperative game play setting. Following their gameplay, participant performance feedback (success vs. failure) was manipulated.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Bounded generalized reciprocity theory and casual game settings

As technology continues to advance, the development of unique interpersonal connections initiated purely through computer-mediated interaction is becoming progressively common (Guitton, 2011, 2015). The theory of bounded generalized reciprocity has recently been applied to the study of video games, particularly those that offer social interactions focused on cooperative and competitive gameplay settings. Applying BGR, Velez (2015) found that the nature of a social relationship created by a video game encounter seems to be directly influenced by whether the interaction was cooperative or competitive. BGR accurately predicted that a cooperative interpersonal setting would lead to a more positive social interaction and more favorable post-game behaviors toward the other players during a subsequent prisoner's dilemma game. Earlier studies by Ewoldsen et al. (2012) and Velez (2012) found similar results, as cooperative game players donated more money to each other than to an opposing out-group player. Therefore, given the recent support for bounded generalized reciprocity theory, an in-game cooperative setting should increase expected positive reciprocity amongst players.

However, as noted earlier, users do not play games only for social reasons, they also play to compare abilities, which is why

performance feedback is considered a vital element of gameplay experience (Velez, 2012). Previous studies that have applied BGR to predict in-group vs. out-group post game reciprocity have yet to examine the potential moderating influence of game performance. Considering that both group setting (competitive/cooperative) and performance feedback (success/failure) are often the most explicitly presented elements of a game play experience, we predict that these two variables will have a combined affect on the way in which an individual perceives partners/competitors. Although a wide variety of interpersonal perceptions have been implicated in traditional in-group/out-group interactions, the present research focuses on the two core dimensions of interpersonal perception, which are also particularly relevant to the context of performance-oriented social video games: perceived competence and liking of the other player (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006; Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009).

### 2.2. Social competition, performance, and perceptions of others in casual games

As discussed earlier, online casual gaming offers users the ability to compete and/or cooperate with an unlimited range of other players, thus allowing for a vast array of social comparisons. Vorderer et al. (2003) discuss the interplay of these factors under the label "social competition" and define the concept as a process through which a player/team seeks to maximize rewards for the self/team while simultaneously disadvantaging others. Previous research has found that competence and liking are closely related constructs (Singh, Ho, Tan, & Bell, 2007), which should influence one another in gaming scenarios. Yet, there are key differences between competitive and cooperative scenarios and these differences may impact a users perceptio of liking and competence held toward a partner or competitor in different ways.

#### 2.2.1. Competence

Competence can generally be defined as the degree to which one can complete tasks proficiently based on their specialized skills, expertise, and/or intelligence (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Within gaming contexts, competence is communicated through task performance. Competence needs are often fulfilled through challenges that provide a commonly valued outcome metric (e.g., time, score), so that abilities can be compared between individuals (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Deci and Ryan (1985) suggested that receiving positive performance feedback directly increases perceptions of self-competence. Casual games often provide some form of performance-based feedback, which allows for an assessment of competence and provides a detailed understanding of the individual's current skills. Given the ubiquitous nature of performance feedback across gaming challenges, players should rely on these cues to formulate perceptions of self-competence.

Perceived competence of another is often relative to individual performance (Festinger, 1954; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), but may also be influenced by the gameplay setting (e.g., cooperative game vs. competitive game). For example, if two people are cooperating on a task and together they fail to meet their mutual goal, it is likely that each will pass blame onto the other to satisfy self-interests. In the context of social gaming, this failure is likely to result in the perception that one's partner is incompetent. This notion is congruent with BGR insofar as previous research has demonstrated that "playing a video game with an unhelpful teammate can disconfirm reciprocity expectations of in-group members and lead to decreases in pro-social behaviors between teammates" (Velez, 2015, p. 488). In contrast, if two people are competing against each other, the losing party is likely to perceive the winner as highly competent because doing so is in one's own best interest. To protect one's own

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