

Achievement Deleted: The Challenges of Quantifying Gaming Capital

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When I first wrote about gaming capital in 2007, the idea of achievements wasn't on my radar. I wasn't much of an Xbox gamer, and the titles that I played didn't seem well suited to such quantification. But over the years I've started to play more games on that system, I've noticed little badge-type notifications appear on my Steam account, and have seen similar items appear just about everywhere game related. It would seem that such achievements are one potential way to quantify and measure some aspect of gaming capital. Certainly there are players who collect them, who judge others by their gamerscore and who will play a certain game or replay particular elements just to increase their rankings. Yet what do achievements really mean, and what can they tell us about gaming capital? I'm going to argue that ultimately they say something, but not what you would expect. This is illustrated through a few stories about my own gameplay practices.

A few years ago I picked up a copy of *Mass Effect* but never got past the initial mission due to my dislike of shooter-action style games. I had the game for my 360 at home, and a friend played through the game on my console while house-sitting for me one long weekend. I thought nothing of it until a couple of months ago when I decided to give the game another try, due to some research I was working on where players constantly referenced the game. I turned the difficulty down to casual and patiently started again, discovering that with some practice and time I started to enjoy it. I put in dozens of hours of gameplay and ultimately completed it, but it wasn't until about 20 hours in that I realized I hadn't heard the familiar "bwap" of an Xbox achievement unlocking. After finishing that session I looked at the achievements page to discover that all of the basic ones had already been unlocked by my friend, four years ago. I felt an odd sense of disappointment and a bit like an imposter—I had been carrying around all of these achievements for years, that I myself did not earn. Was this a form of cheating? Did it actually matter?

Another reason I had decided to give *Mass Effect* another try was because of my great respect for BioWare—I had played and loved both games in the *Dragon Age* series, and had played the first offering several times on my Macbook Pro. In that instance the achievements were displayed on my computer, where I could see how my gameplay was progressing as well as how additional playthroughs were augmenting what I had initially achieved. I started to become mildly curious about earning more achievements, and sometimes altered my gameplay to try and meet various goals.

All of that changed when the hard drive on my Mac died. Although I had been backing up my data faithfully to a cloud service, I had not chosen to (or even thought about) saving my game-related files. When I re-installed the game, all of those records of my earlier achievements were wiped out. It was a blank slate that confronted me when I looked at my gameplay screen—no character, no prior saves, no pretty badges. But what was the big deal? In this instance no one else knew or saw the achievements. I still knew

my own history with the game and what I had accomplished. How (and why) did that erasure alter my perceptions of my own performance and of my history?

These two instances certainly aren't definitive of the larger game playing community, but they do point us to some interesting things to consider in relation to gaming capital. In one instance I had a public record of achievements I had not (yet) really earned; in another the personal record of those accomplishments was destroyed.

Both cases suggest to me that studying someone's achievements, trophies or badges as some kind of measure of gaming capital is likely to be fraught with errors and inconsistencies. Sometimes players will use one another's accounts or systems, either accidentally or on purpose. Other times, hard drives fail or the red ring of death appears, perhaps wiping out 'legitimate' progress.

Yet at the same time, those achievements or their loss clearly meant something to me. Although their *public* display (or disappearance) meant very little, it did give me pause that the absence of the unlocking noise caused me a bit of disappointment. Likewise the visual record of my character's actions in *Dragon Age* was erased, and with it, a little bit of legitimacy that I had put in all of those hours. So I can't simply toss away the idea of achievements meaning something—they affected my ideas about my own gaming capital. They perhaps provided a bit of legitimacy, a sort of proof, if only to myself, about what I had done, and where I had been.

Of course this raises the question—if it were only for myself, would gaming capital matter? Does it have to circulate? If my opinions are still intact, what does it matter if the badges or score are erased, or even overly inflated? Perhaps these are more interesting questions to ask players—to see how their own ideas about gaming capital, their knowledge and expertise, are intertwined with achievements. And likewise, what pleasures and annoyances, as well as disappointments, come from the accumulation as well as destruction of trophies and badges.