Making TV and Video Games Play Nicely

"Pull Up Your Pip-Boy 3000: Video Games, Flow and Second Screen Gaming Experiences"
Caren Pagel, *Georgia State University*

Many recent major video games have offered gamers a second screen experience in the form of a free, mobile companion application. Although second screen applications began as experiences for television viewing, many game developers have invested in companion apps for release alongside high-profile games such as *Grand Theft Auto V, Fallout 4* and the Wii U console in an attempt to extend player engagement. These video game apps—much like their television counterparts—vary wildly in how they augment the user experience with some directly tied to gameplay, some allowing players to earn rewards, and some offering separate game experiences thematically tied to the base game. Despite the push towards companion apps for these games, these apps have not significantly connected with users. In order to understand why this might be the case, this paper will look to Raymond Williams' concept of flow and television studies' experience with second screen apps to understand the user experience of the console space and how companion apps potentially disrupt the unique console flow.

The concept of flow should ideally be utilized from both the television studies and video game studies perspectives because they likely work together to create flow within the ecosystem of the console. Williams' concept of the traditional flow of television programming as planned sequences designed to hold viewers may be repurposed here to explain the user's interface with the console, while video game studies' understanding of the cognitive flow of deep immersion may help explain the user's engagement. As gaming consoles have become more sophisticated and more audiences have cut the cord from traditional television viewing, console developers such as Microsoft and Sony have expanded the capabilities of the Xbox and PlayStation lines beyond simple gaming machines and successfully marketed their respective consoles as an entertainment box that "only does everything." Current consoles like the Xbox One and the PlayStation 4 allow users to play games, but these devices also play video discs, stream music, host social media, allow users to create and upload videos, and deliver various streaming services like Netflix, HBOGO and Crunchyroll to name only a few capabilities. Critically, console manufacturers—whose goal is no longer to keep the user in the game, but in the console—have increasingly designed the user experience of the transition between these various programs to appear as seamless and load-free as possible with the ability to pause and resume play between applications hours or days later right where the user left off. This design has encouraged a sense of unending flow and engagement with the console space that keep users immersed in the system and captures them under a unified content provider.

Although games and game consoles contain numerous planned interruptions—with loading screens being the most obvious example—the introduction of a second screen seems too great an interruption to both traditional and cognitive flow to maintain user engagement over long periods of time. To a large extent, this has also been true in the case of television second screen applications. As Ethan Tussey has found in his work on second screen applications, television companion apps tend to be designed to support television watching often through the replication of television content and have limited functionality that often distracts or even impedes the user's viewing experience. Many video game apps have adopted a similar strategy of replication of content more readily available within the game interface. High-profile games *Metal Gear Solid V*

and *Fallout 4* have been released with companion apps that replicate the game's in-world map and the menu and map screens, respectively. While these are obviously designed to support gameplay, users must draw their attention away from the base game and console flow in order to engage these apps and users often find these applications unpolished and limited in their ability to augment gameplay.

Much like designers of second screen apps for television, designers of second screen apps for video games have not been entirely successful in the design of these apps perhaps because they often ignore the natural interruption points in the console flow and typical user behavior. The most obvious point for intervention would be the game loading screens that interrupt in a similar manner to advertising breaks and beckon unplanned use of mobile devices. Additionally, many users now augment their console experiences with their mobile devices to tap into the collective intelligence of users for game strategies, information and FAQs that would have previously driven users to abandon the television for the computer screen to access, and they often judge a companion app by the quality of game rewards it offers. While creating a successful gaming companion app may still be a difficult endeavor, developers who design with respect to flow and second screen studies may be able to create a more engaged experience.