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The Allure of Games: Toward an Updated Theory of the Leisure Class

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What is This?

The Allure of Games: Toward an Updated Theory of the Leisure Class

Neil B. Niman[1]

Abstract

Gamers spend as many as 2.5 billion hours per week playing games. The gaming literature has relied on the field of positive psychology and the concept of flow to explain why gamers are willing to work so hard in order to have fun. However, many games are played within a social context and hence produce explicit rewards capable of generating status and self-esteem for the individual player. The importance of relative position and the invidious comparisons that naturally take place within a social group can be traced back to Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Applying Veblen's framework to the modern world of games enables us to develop new insights into why video games have become an important part of life for many in modern society.

Keywords

If you asked a game designer why individuals like to play games, the most likely explanation is because it is fun (Chatfield, 2010; Dignan, 2011; McGonigal, 2011). Thus, Edward Castronova (2006, 2008), one of the few economists who have written about gaming likes to talk about the emergence of a fun economy. From the

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perspective of an outsider observing games such as World of Warcraft where earning achievements appears to be a large component of the experience, what passes for fun looks, at times, to be a great deal of hard work. This raises the question: Why are gamers who spend as many as 2.5 billion hours per week playing games, willing to "work" so hard in order to have fun?[1]

The intellectual foundation of the concept of fun employed by the gaming digerati is based in the new field of positive psychology originating in the work of Martin Seligman (2002) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Utilizing Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, it is contended that the appeal of gaming derives from the intrinsic rewards that emerge with game play. For gamers such as Jane McGonigal, these intrinsic rewards tend to outshine and dominate any recognition of the external rewards associated with gaming. Externally derived status leading to the development of self-esteem is dismissed as being something that is transient and subject to hedonic adaptation.[2] However, one of the appeals of gaming noted by McGonigal and others is that it takes place within a distinct culture that is part of a broader social environment. Therefore, while it may be true that intrinsic rewards are more satisfying, it is not clear that one can so readily dismiss the notion of extrinsic rewards as a motivating factor and at least part of the reason why gamers spend countless hours at play within the confines of a synthetic world.

One theory that acknowledges the importance of work for developing a satisfying life while also acknowledging the place of the individual within a broader social context can be found in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*.[3] Veblen uses a combination of economics, anthropology, and sociology to develop a unique understanding of industrialized society. The foundation of Veblen's theory rests in the hands of individual motivation that is in part driven by an Instinct of Workmanship and in part by the need to make invidious comparisons with one's peers in order to gain self-esteem. These comparisons manifest themselves in the process of pecuniary emulation and gain resolution through the attainment of status. Such behavior manifests itself in the form of conspicuous consumption and leisure and becomes the harbinger for the creation of an entire social class.

With Veblen's concept of the leisure class and the corresponding use of status for building self-esteem, we have an alternate explanation for the sustained game play indicative of many hard core gamers. Gamers may indeed play for the intrinsic rewards associated with having fun, but also play in order to obtain a more meritorious position relative to others in a gaming environment. Earning achievements serves as a scorecard that codifies one's prowess relative to others in navigating the intricacies of a particular game. It establishes a sense of identity that is based in something that is both measurable and comparable in relation to one's peer group. In performing this function, game play builds extrinsic rewards in the form of self-esteem. Thus, one plays to have fun *and* feel better about oneself.

In order to develop this notion that gaming offers more than merely fun, the question of whether intrinsic or extrinsic rewards drive game play must first be discussed. We then look at the structure of massively multiplayer online role-playing games

(MMORPGs) and then show how they are consistent with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. We then explore the emergence of socially responsible gaming in the form of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and once again turn to Veblen's ideas to explain how they embody an expanded view of the leisure class.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Affirmation

When we look at the structure of MMORPGs, they are designed around mechanics such as levels, achievements, experience points, rankings, leader boards, and other constructs that appear to provide external affirmation to play. In addition, some gamers have been known to pay others to log onto their account and play their character in order to reach higher levels in a shorter period of time. This process of leveling up relieves the player from the drudgery of grinding through repetitive tasks before being able to reach a higher (and presumably more interesting) level in the game. In addition to power leveling, we observe a practice known as gold farming where gamers can use real world currency to purchase in-game gold. The gold is generated from game play undertaken by workers (often in China) who produce gold not to advance themselves in a game environment, but rather to generate a profit through the sale to players who are eager to buy better weapons, armor, or other items that give an advantage relative to others within the game environment.

Lehdonvirta and Ernkvist (2011) estimate that gross revenues from third-party gaming services were approximately 3 billion dollars in 2009. Given the large size of the market for power leveling and gold farming, it is difficult to conclude that gamers are only interested in the joy derived directly from the play itself. Yet, it is the intrinsic rewards associated with work that draws on our capabilities and provides challenges that are perfectly suited for our abilities that leads McGonigal (2011) to adopt the concept of flow as the primary reason why gamers spend so much of their time at play.

According to McGonigal (2011, p. 28), "Games make us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves, and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work." Game play is characterized as the right work at the right time for the right person. The underlying rationale for drawing such a conclusion is found in her contention that "games don't fuel our appetite for extrinsic reward: they don't pay us, they don't advance our careers, and they don't help us accumulate luxury goods. Instead, games enrich us with intrinsic rewards" (2011, p. 50).

What McGonigal is referring to is not the industry that surrounds gaming where millions of dollars can be made, but rather the underlying motivation behind game play for the vast majority of players. Her perspective is based on the autotelict approach of Csikszentmihalyi (1975). The word autotelic is defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p. 10) as a combination of auto = *self* + telos = *goal, purpose*. Behavior that is autotelict is found in activities that "maximize immediate, intrinsic rewards to the participant" (1975, p. 21), creates an experience characterized by

"discovery and exploration" (1975, p. 32), and is one that completely involves the actor with his activity (1975, p. 36).

Recognizing that some rewards are external and not exclusively the result of the activities themselves, Csikszenthmihalyi creates the concept of flow. Flow is not only a word that is easier to remember (and pronounce), but it is one that recognizes the existence of extrinsic rewards. However, while the concept of flow is broader and incorporates both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, those rewards that are internally associated with an activity dominate. As a result, for those activities where flow is most apparent, the intrinsic rewards of an activity come to the forefront and therefore individuals seek flow in and of itself with little concern for external recognition. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 92) describe this in the following manner: "When attention is completely absorbed in the challenges at hand, the individual achieves an ordered state of consciousness. Thoughts feelings, wishes, and action are in concert." Therefore they contend that "From the perspective of the individual, the flow state is a self-justifying experience; it is by definition an end in itself" (2002, p. 96).

For McGonigal, flow is not an end to itself but rather is a state of consciousness that leads to fiero. Fiero is viewed as a primal emotion that inspires human beings to strive to do great things. It is associated with a feeling of self-accomplishment; that one has done something of significance. It "is what we feel after we triumph over adversity" (McGonigal, 2011, p. 33). As such we strive to experience this emotion as frequently as possible and are therefore attracted to those activities that present the best opportunity for encountering flow and achieving fiero.

However, if flow and fiero were the only factors that mattered, then we might expect to see all games structured in a way similar to the game of chess.[4] Chess is a game played on a single level with a finite beginning and end. Play is limited by a set of rigid rules that define what is and is not allowed. Feedback is easily earned every time a piece is taken from an opponent and the ultimate sense of accomplishment is attained when the game reaches its terminal ending point. It is therefore easy to imagine how a player might become lost in the flow of the game and as piece after piece disappears from the game board gains fiero. A complete sense of accomplishment is reached when the game ends in victory for the winning player.

Yet, games like MMORPGs go beyond simple game design principles to create an experience where it is easy for players to record, display, and compare individual achievements. The achievements associated with reaching a higher level or a similar type of success and the comparisons that are inevitably made as the result of keeping score, creates status for the player. Status forms the basis for gaining self-esteem. This self-esteem arises naturally from the comparisons that occur when individuals evaluate their position relative to others.

The existence of game design elements that lend themselves to making relative comparisons perhaps lie at the foundation of Hewitt's (2002) critique of positive psychology.[5] In writing about self-esteem and the new psychology, he makes the following observations:

> I take the position that psychological findings about self-esteem are not universal or
> essential facts but discoveries about the psychology of socially, culturally, and histori-
> cally situated human beings ... Likewise, self-esteem is enhanced when the person is
> able to make favorable comparisons with other people or with an ideal self, and it is
> enhanced when the person acts effectively in his or her physical or social environment.
> Membership in and acceptance by some group, the evaluation of persons along various
> dimensions, the propensity to make invidious comparisons, and the importance placed
> on individual action are deeply embedded in contemporary American culture. This cul-
> ture fosters anxiety about the person's acceptance by others, emphasizing the individ-
> ual's responsibility to create a social world or to carve out a place in an existing one
> where he or she can be warmly embraced (Hewitt, 2002, p. 136).

The emergence of self-esteem as a driver for game play does not obviate the con-
cept of flow, but merely suggests that flow in and of itself is not sufficient to explain
many of the design elements incorporated in games that take place in virtual worlds.
The approval of others provides an assessment of our performance and becomes the
source for making invidious comparisons. These comparisons form the basis for
obtaining status and higher levels of status create self-esteem.

The Structure of MMORPGs

To better understand the role that self-esteem plays in games, we can look more closely
at the structure of MMORPGs. These games typically take place in a fantasy world
where players play against each other (PvP) or against a hostile environment (PvE). The
most popular of this class is World of Warcraft with over 11.5 million users.[6]

These games share a common framework containing the following list of elements:

Achievement.
Efficiency.
Social interaction.
Competition.
Status.
Honor.
Self-esteem.

The heart of every role-playing game is the concept of achievement. Players
begin with limited skills and abilities. They must work their way up through some
form of pecking order in order to unlock game features or experience new territories.
It is the possibility of undertaking new and more complex adventures within a richer
game environment that serves as one motivation for earning achievements. From the
very first moment, players understand that the rewards associated with a particular
game can only be obtained through hard work.

To keep players motivated, the game generally takes place within multiple levels.
By separating the game into levels, it becomes easier for players to keep track of

their progress in the game. The success in reaching higher and higher levels serves as a system of reinforcement that motivates additional effort. By embedding the concept of progress into a gaming framework that consists of a hierarchy of levels, the game promotes the concept of efficiency. The sooner a player can reach the next higher level, the more rewarding the game experience becomes. As such, players look to minimize the time they spend on a particular level by obtaining those skills or experiences necessary to move up in the game in the most efficient manner possible.

Often players can increase their skill levels by working with others. In fact, many games at some point require players to work with others in order to earn a new achievement. One of the purposes of this social interaction is to take advantage of a broader division of labor in an effort to improve the productivity of all players. By pooling their relevant talents, players can reach goals that are generally unobtainable to an individual working alone. In this way, games mimic the real world where many organizations rely upon team-based production in order to maximize output while using the fewest resources.

The formation of social units (which in some games take on the form of "Guilds"), serve as coordinating mechanisms designed to identify the skills needed to accomplish some task and to divide those tasks in a way that each individual is assigned a job that matches their particular skills and talent. The formation of social structures like guilds leads to competition either within the guild to see who gets assigned which tasks or between guilds to see which one can obtain a particular achievement first. As such, the concept of competition enters the game leading to differential levels of success. Some players or groups of players are more talented than others and hence will be ranked higher within the structure of the game.

Differential success makes relative comparisons possible and thus forms the basis for obtaining status. When all players are not equally good at all things, then status is conferred to those players who are able to succeed where others have failed. Yet, the concept of status is itself a moving target. There is always one more level or another achievement to be reached and thus status is fleeting because while one can gain relative superiority to those below, at least at the lower levels of the game, there is always a higher level populated by other players who have attained a greater level of status.

Moving up through the game one level at a time brings the player closer to becoming a meaningful participant who can make a difference in terms of some underlying epic drama. Typically, this drama is structured around the triumph of good over evil in an effort to confer some type of meaning to the game. As a result, overpowering evil confers honor to players that transcends other forms of victory such as those based on relative displays of strength between opposing players within a game. Thus, those achievements that are the direct result of actions that destroy evil become honorific and confer an even higher level of status. As a result, status is not only associated with moving through the game but also arises from the nature of the achievements themselves at each level of the game.

From MMORPGs to the Development of a Theory of the Leisure Class

Role playing games like World of Warcraft, first person shooter games such as Halo, Call of Duty and others, or even sports games such as Madden Football provide a framework for the achievement of some goal resulting from the navigation of a set of rules that lead to outcomes where objective comparisons can be made between players. Self-esteem emerges as players compare their relative success either in terms of the outcome achieved within a given contest or as the result of comparisons made of one's success relative to others at some other time playing the same game.[7]

The pursuit of self-esteem is not a recent phenomenon that exists only in modern society. The work of Thorstein Veblen, one of the founders of modern sociology, traces the origin of the concept back to the early days of human society dominated by what he terms as the predatory culture surrounding human survival. In those early days, hunting and gathering food was not only necessary for survival, but became a source for making relative comparisons and hence achieving status and ultimately self-esteem. Hunting and similar contests of strength and skill were a part of everyday life and the number, size, or type of animal slain during the hunt served as trophies that became powerful displays of one's relative prowess. As such, the prominent display of these trophies became the best evidence for evaluating one's brute strength and the acquisition of a certain level of status within the social group. Since the survival of the group depended in part on the ability of a tribe's hunters to provide food, killing animals became honorific and those hunters that enjoy relative success came to be deserving of recognition and admiration by the other members of the tribe.

According to Veblen, the transition to industrialized society did not obviate the use of relative comparisons to generate self-esteem. Instead, predatory behavior is subordinated within the context of contests of physical prowess embodied in modern sporting activities. Harkening back to those remaining vestiges of the predatory culture, sporting contests provide an avenue for achieving relative success, creating an objective measure of that success, and therefore generate a framework for building self-esteem.[8] Individuals or groups (teams) do battle within the parameters of an organized contest where the rules are clearly spelled out in a manner where one side can emerge as victorious. With victory comes not only the knowledge of relative superiority, but often some token (perhaps in the form of a trophy or winnings) that serves to not only display, but continuously reinforce one's prowess at playing the sport. Victory confers honor and the corresponding distribution of trophies, awards, or the publication of scores provides the necessary symbols for relative success.

In the mind of Veblen, organized sporting activity is a derivative of the more pervasive Instinct of Workmanship. Veblen believed that human beings are motivated by a desire to create, to do something productive, and to establish meaning through one's achievements. Thus, he believed that human beings have a natural propensity for what he terms as effective work and a strong distaste for futile effort.[9] He believed that training, conditioning, practicing, and participation require a similar skill set and operational pattern as those that promotes industrial efficiency.

Sports are only a small part of human society and with the industrialization of the means of production, Veblen believed that the predatory function morphed from physical to mental prowess as it became embodied in the role of "captain of industry."[10] As such, the attainment of status shifted from contests based on relative physical strength to ones that are based on abilities that rely on mental acumen. Productive rather than acquisitional efficiency became the new standard for emulation and hence the invidious comparisons that are made between individuals.[11] Economic success through the accumulation of wealth resulting from being the most successful producer of goods became the new foundation for making comparisons between individuals and thus serving as the basis for establishing esteem.

Since how much wealth one has stored in their bank account does not easily lend itself to comparison between individuals, consumption in terms of what one can afford with a certain amount of wealth, rather than wealth itself, became the basis for making comparisons and hence creating self-esteem. Consumption is important because as noted by Veblen (1899 [1979], p. 36): "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence."

However, as everyone begins to put their respective wealth in evidence, conspicuous consumption becomes itself a form of contest. As friends, neighbors, coworkers, rivals, and others place their wealth on display in the form of material possessions, a competition emerges to see who is driving the most powerful automobile, living in the biggest house, or owns the most expensive watch. As a form of hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999), a person can only continue to feel good about themselves as a person if they are able to match each purchase by a peer with an even more expensive purchase of their own. In this way, the measure of success is constantly changing as individuals engage in activities designed to outdo the other. It is as if the process of making invidious comparisons is equivalent to climbing a ladder where each step reveals another new step that is higher than the one before and must be continuously climbed in order to preserve a feeling of self-worth.

If conspicuous consumption is the visual display of one's relative economic success, then an even higher measure of success would be to not work at all. If work is the embodiment of all that is productive, then the antithesis of work is leisure; an activity that becomes the embodiment of waste. As such, the luxury of wasting time becomes the highest measure of economic success. " . . . a life of leisure is the readiest and most conclusive evidence of pecuniary strength, and therefore of superior force; provided always that the gentleman of leisure can live in manifest ease and comfort" (Veblen, 1899 [1979], p. 38).

Together, achievement, status, and honor build self-esteem. Higher levels of self-esteem create a stronger sense of self and lead the individual to feel better about themselves relative to others. Thus, while it is common to talk about happiness as the primary driver underlying game play, Veblen's richer framework offers a broader conception for what sustains interest in a game. This becomes particularly

relevant when trying to explain those games where much of the time is spent engaging in activities that appear to be similar to work. While happiness may play a role, under the surface, it is the ability to build esteem, and hence feel better about oneself and how one fits in the world (whether real or synthetic) that serves as a prime motivator underlying game play. *I play because it makes me feel good about myself and that in turn makes me happy*.

The Emergence of Socially Responsible Gaming

With the emergence of social responsible gaming as exemplified by *World Without Oil* or *Evoke*, one might think that Veblen's *Theory of the leisure class* has run its course. That today's digitally based society has evolved into something that is fundamentally different from the predatory culture of early human society or the more recent industrial society found at the turn of the 20th century. Designed to raise social awareness and harness the power of gaming in order to effect positive social change, these ARGs have emerged as the antithesis of conspicuous leisure.

ARGs blur the distinction between the real world and the world of games (Kim, Lee, Thomas, & Dombrowski, 2009). They are designed to bring gamers together in order to collectively solve puzzles in an effort to advance some particular story line. Because ARGs do not take place in a self-contained environment like MMORPGs, the success and enjoyment derived from the game depends on the collaborative nature of the environment. Without collective interaction, there is nothing to push the game forward and it eventually stops. ARGs are like improvisational theatrical productions (Kim, Allen, & Lee, 2008) that have an air of spontaneity and randomness not found in a real scripted play.

They were initially developed to promote a movie in the case of *A.I.* (a Steven Spielberg production) or a particular product such as Halo 2. *The Beast* is generally recognized as one of the first ARGs and was used in 2001 to promote the movie *A.I.* Funded by Microsoft, the project was an attempt to introduce the audience to the science fiction world in which the movie takes place in order to heighten the experience when subsequently viewing the film. This medium was used again by Microsoft to promote the release of Halo 2, a first person shooter video game for the Xbox 360. Known as *I Love Bees*, this ARG in 2004 attempted to build a new fan base and reengage the existing base in order to build a buzz leading up to the release of the game.

To foster collective interaction and freedom of movement, ARGs use a variety of different kinds of media. Blog posts, print, television, e-mail, and conventional telephone lines are all potential avenues for connecting players, distributing important information about the game, and creating an environment of total immersion in game play. Communication is essentially viral in that it takes on a life of its own as players choose between various media in order to communicate with other players.

While viral communication is in some sense random, an element of coordination is still needed in order to move the game forward. Game play in an ARG is generally

controlled by what is referred to as a ''Puppet Master.'' Puppet Masters (designers) respond to changes in play, continually update story lines and create new challenges for players.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that ARGs became the perfect vehicle for promoting social responsibility. Within this game form, success is not measured in terms of individual achievement, but instead how well brain cycles can be combined from a diverse group of people in an effort to make progress toward solving a social problem.[12] Rather than just being motivated by individual gain, the collectivist approach toward game play found in ARGs promotes the concept of achievement that is shared among all participants in an effort to combat a problem that in turn, is also shared by everyone.[13]

That is not to say that individual achievements are not used to motivate individual play, but rather, they take a hybrid approach where self-esteem is developed as both the result of individual achievement *and* collective action. These games are designed to create what Jane McGonigal refers to as ''super-empowered hopeful individuals,'' while building an awareness of problems that exist that can only be solved when very specialized individuals work together for the collective good. People play socially responsible ARGs because they want to believe that they are part of the solution to a problem that is larger than life. They need to believe that their participation might make a meaningful difference in discovering and/or implementing a solution to some epic problem.

Following on the 2007 release of *World Without Oil*, one of the best examples of the power of an ARG to promote social responsibility can be found in the game called *EVOKE*. In describing what an Evoke is, the following is used to explain the concept to potential game players: "There's an old saying here: If you have a problem, and you cannot solve it alone, evoke it. When we evoke, we look for creative solutions. We use whatever resources we have. We get as many people involved as possible. We take risks. We come up with ideas that have never been tried before. An evoke is an urgent call to innovation."[14]

The game consists of weekly missions that are based on an epic problem. The epic problems consist of global issues such as: Food security, energy, water security, disaster relief, poverty, pandemic, education, and human rights. Missions are designed with a learning component designed to teach players about an epic problem, an action component designed to prompt players to get out into the world and do something, and finally, an imagine component designed to help foster the development of new creative approaches for solving epic problems.

However, the degree to which an individual can contribute toward a collective solution depends on the quality of their own skill set. To help build human capital in order to have more effective participants in order to elevate epic problem solving to a higher level, quests are also offered to game players to foster the development of what is called an origin story. Origin stories are developed to help establish individual identity. They are meant to take on superhero proportions in order to build a self-image where individuals begin to believe that they can make a difference and that

their individual actions will make a contribution toward solving a broader social problem. Skill building becomes the vehicle for developing a more impressive origin story that can form the basis for creating individual status within the game. The acquisition of these skills places players in a stronger position to make a positive contribution toward completing a mission and furthering the overarching goal of the game, which is to create super empowered individuals who are willing to make a contribution toward solving some epic problem. The development of an origin story grounds the individual within the story and provides a foundation for establishing a feeling of self-worth.

By participating in quests, skills are developed and take on the form of EVOKE Powers. These powers consist of: collaboration, courage, creativity, entrepreneurship, local insight, knowledge sharing, resourcefulness, spark, sustainability, and vision. At the same time, social awareness is developed through participation in missions. Each mission is based on the ability of the individual player to learn, act, and imagine. They are offered one credit if one objective from each mission is satisfied or a heroic credit if two objectives are completed. A legendary credit can be earned if all three objectives associated with a particular mission are completed.

To achieve mission credit, the player must post evidence that they completed a mission. This forms the basis for earning and collecting Power Votes. Quests build EVOKE Powers and form a visual record that other players can use to give Power Votes to other players. Players collect these votes and the more votes they have, the higher they rank on the leader board. The leader board serves as a way that players can compare their performance to other players in the game. These relative comparisons can then be used to build self-esteem. By completing at least one objective from each mission and all ten quests, players become certified by the World Bank Institute as a Certified Innovator. Completing 2 objectives from each mission and all 10 quests leads to certification with heroic honors and completing all 3 objectives with each mission (along with the 10 quests) gets a player certified with legendary honors.

Hence social consciousness is raised through individual achievement and social responsibility is weaved within the fabric of the game. While collective action is needed to generate Epic Wins, participation only comes with a sense of individual accomplishment. Veblen's Instinct of Workmanship does not disappear. The existence of quests are required for skill building and with that, all of the standard caveats in terms of providing incentives to motivate individual achievement still apply. However, one does not display their prowess by embracing the antithesis of efficiency in the form of waste, but instead through one's actions to successfully perform a mission and thus achieve a higher level of social responsibility.

Gamers as the New Leisure Class

Can we use the work of Veblen to explain the emergence of socially responsible gaming? Within Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, economic success is the

result of producing the largest number of goods using the fewest resources. However, in his later work, *The Theory of the Business Enterprise*, Veblen [1904 (1978)] recognized that pecuniary success may have absolutely nothing to do with efficiency. The application of market power may create higher profits for the firm and hence provide a stronger foundation for pecuniary success. These higher profits arise from the ability of the firm to raise prices by restricting the output it produces. One consequence of restricting output is that production no longer takes place at the minimum possible cost. As a result, efficiency is sacrificed by the drive to achieve pecuniary success.

Another consequence of market power is the cost to society often referred to as dead weight loss. Dead weight loss occurs when the firm with market power restricts output in order to raise prices. The difference between what would have been produced in a competitive market and the lower level of output that is actually produced forms the basis for this type of loss. Society must settle for having fewer goods or services than would have otherwise been produced if market power did not exist.

In addition to the strategic use of market power, higher levels of pecuniary success may result from market failure. Various types of market failure (which are the adverse consequence of productive activity) may enrich the producer at the expense of everyone else. The most prominent examples are found in the creation of negative externalities. If an entrepreneur locates a new plant next to a river and one consequence of the productive technology chosen is to turn a clean river into a dirty one, then the creation of individual wealth carries with it a social cost. Without a way to force or encourage the polluter to bear all of the social costs, then the owner of the factory is enriched at the expense of others.

Whether as the result of market power or market failure, a by-product of pecuniary emulation is not just wasteful spending, but must also include the waste of productive resources. While waste may be the antithesis of efficiency, if it is generated by holding efficiency at bay, then it may not serve as a positive symbol for the acquisition of wealth. Rather, waste acquires negative connotations associated with undesirable social behavior.

Hence waste as expressed through conspicuous consumption and leisure no longer serves as a positive expression of relative economic success. Instead, it becomes associated with the creation of social problems such as climate change or a growing gap in the distribution of income resulting from a misallocation of resources. In so far as the wanton disregard for the welfare of others becomes the by-product of productive activity, something else must emerge as a counterpoint to the negative consequences associated with this undesirable behavior. In the case of a business person who achieves pecuniary success by exploiting others or ravaging the environment, the antithesis would be to champion movements that vow to eradicate such social ills.[15] By joining a cause that advocates the elimination of those things that lead to economic success, the successful individual can now send the strongest possible signal that they have made it and therefore no longer need to rely on market power or failure to establish pecuniary strength.

Just as waste is positioned as the antithesis of efficiency, a new movement based on the concept of social responsibility turns into the antithesis of market power or market failure.[16] When society rather than a concept (efficiency) becomes the victim of the drive for pecuniary emulation, the consequences of the pursuit for profits takes on a greater meaning. Social problems such as climate change or poverty become larger than life. The sheer magnitude of these social problems gives them a higher level of status. They transcend the actions of a single individual and the collective consequences of such actions have a negative effect on society as a whole.

As a result, a new avenue for building esteem appears in the form of what we might call Epic Wins. Epic Wins are associated with solving problems that transcend the actions of a single individual. Righting a wrong, saving the world from the by-products of pecuniary emulation, or making the world a safer place are all examples where multiple individuals have contributed to a single problem and where solving the problem requires the actions of many working together. Because the problem is so large and the solution requires the help of many, working toward a solution confers great honor. This opens the door for the development of socially responsible games where the problems are larger than life and individual participation can bring with it the means for reaching a solution. The formation of a new leisure class is not one that sits idly by while visibly displaying pecuniary success, but rather, visibly dedicates their time toward solving some common problem.

Concluding Remarks

We might look at the rise of gaming as a new epoch in the development of human society. In the beginning was Primitive Society where the predatory culture upheld brute strength as the visible measure for success. With improvement in the standard of living, the primitive gave way to Market Society where the corresponding development of an acquisitional culture found its highest expression in pecuniary strength. Finally, with the rise of gaming, we see Synthetic Societies begin to shift focus away from market-based activity. Within this new social form, responsibility becomes the foundation for its culture and the development of "Super Powers" becomes its crowning achievement.

To better understand the underlying motivation behind gaming, the *Theory of the Leisure Class* conceived over a century ago has been resurrected in order to show how both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can provide a more complete understanding of why gamers are willing to work so hard in order to have fun. If Veblen was alive today, instead of writing in terms of an Instinct of Workmanship, he might have chosen to express that half of his theory within the fabric of the positive psychology advocated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Adopting some concept of flow to work alongside the invidious comparisons that exist in the culture of both real and virtual worlds brings Veblen's theory into the 20th century, thereby making it as relevant today as it was more than a century ago.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. McGonigal (2011, p. 3) reports that globally there are 183 million active gamers if each gamer played 2 hours a day on average and 7 days a week, that equals a little more than 2. 5 billion hours a week.
2. In standard economics, we assume that increasing the amount of something is often subject to diminishing marginal utility. The first unit provides a great deal of satisfaction, but each incremental unit adds less and less to total utility. Hedonic adaption on the other hand offers a different approach to the concept of satisfaction. It refers to the need to increase the quantities of a particular good in order to maintain the same level of satisfaction. In other words, increasing quantities are required in order to achieve the same level of satisfaction.
3. Veblen, who wrote his most influential works at the turn of the 20th century, went on to become the founder of American Institutional Economics and an important contributor to the field of sociology.
4. Chess is one example of game play used by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) to explain the concept of flow.
5. Mruk (2008, p. 145) comments: "While recently reading a large portion of the standard work in this new positive psychology, I was shocked to find that only a single article or chapter focused on self-esteem as its central subject!"
6. If the statistics available at MMORPGREALM.COM are accurate, then in 2010, there were more than 11.5 million gamers playing World of Warcraft. Of that total, nearly half reside in Asia, one in five is female and the average player in the United States spends 22.5 hours per week playing the game. Each day, 16.6 million tasks are completed. This information was downloaded from http://www.mmorpgrealm.com/world-of-warcraft-statistic-in-2010/ on April 1, 2011.
7. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 80) define games as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome."
8. From Veblen's (1899 [1979], p. 338) perspective sports emerge when: The reputable non-industrial outlets for the human propensity to action presently fail, through the advance of economic development, the disappearance of large game, the decline of war, the obsolescence of proprietary government, and the decay of the priestly office. When this happens, the situation begins to change. Human life must seek expression in one direction if it may not in another; and if the predatory outlet fails, relief is sought elsewhere.

9. The concept of effective work transitions into economic efficiency as the division of labor begins to grab hold with the development of tools. For example, with the assistance of tools designed as weapons, men utilize their physical strength to become hunters. Women on the other hand, being smaller in stature, utilize a different set of tools to perform those other tasks required to preserve, foster, and advance life. As a result, early societies stratify around the functions that are performed within the division of labor. Men exploit nature for food by reaping what they have not sown, while women engage in productive labor rather than "an acquisition of substance by seizure" (Veblen, 1899 [1979], p. 14). The tasks performed by women become associated with work and by its nature, implies something subservient or ignoble. On the other hand, the activities engaged in by men become glorified because they are based on exploitation and hence seemingly create something without having to suffer the indignities associated with work.

10. Only with the establishment of a system of property rights does it become possible to have a struggle between human beings for the possession of goods. With this change comes a shift in how one views the struggle for existence. No longer is it conceived as a response to the niggardliness of nature. As the economy moves beyond subsistence, it becomes a struggle for the "comforts of life."

11. Veblen was influenced heavily by Darwin's theory of evolution. For Veblen, the Instinct for Workmanship was an essential component for the survival of the species. The efficient utilization of resources would promote individual fitness. Higher levels of fitness would increase the probability for survival. A greater number of members surviving contribute to an increased probability that the entire species will survive. This point is developed in more detail by Cordes (2005). A biological explanation for pecuniary emulation and relative comparisons has been developed more fully in Niman (2006).

12. Examples of the power of crowdsourcing are not limited to ARGs. In the puzzle game Foldit, gamers were able to do what research scientists had been unable to successful accomplish; they were able to determine the structure of an enzyme critical to the reproduction of the HIV virus in a period of 3 weeks (Howe, 2012).

13. Support for the concept of collective intelligence can be found in Pentland (2007) along with Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hasmi, and Malone (2010).

14. This description was downloaded from: http://www.urgentevoke.com/page/how-to-play, on April 11, 2011.

15. In a recent NBER Working Paper, Kotchen and Moon (2011) find empirical support for the proposition that companies engage in social responsibility in order to offset corporate irresponsibility.

16. Just as evolutionary biology can be used to explain why efficiency and invidious comparisons play important roles in the survival of the species, social responsibility can also be understood from an evolutionary perspective. In so far as economic success serves as a signal for the quality of one's genes, acts of social responsibility provide positive signals of one's willingness to provide for one's offspring after birth. Genes can only survive from one generation to the next if the organism lives long enough to mate. A parent who is willing to sacrifice their own fitness to promote the fitness of offspring is one who increases the chances that their genes will survive in future generations.

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