

1 ACHIEVEMENTS

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Achievements is a term coined by Microsoft in 2005 to describe a reward system for digital games that they introduced with the launch of the Xbox 360 console. The system quickly gained significant success, which led to the implementation of achievement systems on Valve's personal computer gaming platform Steam, Apple's iOS gaming network Game Center, and Sony's PlayStation Network (in this case called "trophies"). Although Nintendo has similar systems for certain games, it stands out as the notable exception to this trend. Achievements have also been implemented on many other gaming platforms, sometimes under different names such as "badges."

The term itself as well as the particulars of its contemporary form are relatively recent, but achievements build on previous systems of external awards for the accomplishment of objectives. Looking outside of video games, we will find that these kinds of systems go far back in time. After giving an overview of how achievement systems work, I examine the origin of contemporary achievement systems and trace the origin of the term. I use Microsoft's achievements as an example of how such systems work, including player reception and appropriation. Finally, I map out the history of reward systems that laid the ground for contemporary achievement systems.

Achievement Anatomy

Achievements are one of eight different types of reward systems in games, as categorized by Hao Wang and Chuen-Tsai Sun (2011). Different achievement systems vary in terms of the details of their implementation but share some general characteristics. Drawing on Markus Montola, Timo Nummenmaa, Andrés Lucero, and their colleagues (2009), Staffan Björk (2012), as well as my own work (Jakobsson 2011), we can describe achievements as persistent public reward systems separate from the rest of the game but connected to optional in-game

challenges. The term *achievements* is somewhat misleading. The tasks that have to be completed to unlock achievements are often trivial, such as finishing a tutorial, using a certain weapon, or playing a game for a certain amount of time.

Juho Hamari and Veikko Eranti (2011) separate achievements into three necessary components: *signifier*, *completion logic*, and *reward*. The *signifier* is the part that is presented to the player. It normally consists of a name, an icon-size graphical representation, and a description that lets the player know the requirements for unlocking the achievement.

The *completion logic* defines the game state that will unlock the achievement. It can be triggered by a player action such as blowing up 20 so-called infected (zombies) in a single explosion in *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios/Valve South, 2008) for the Pyrotechnician achievement or by a system event such as 60 seconds passing without shooting or dying in *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* (Bizarre Creations, 2005) for the Pacifism achievement. Sometimes there are several triggers, such as the Scholar achievement in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007), which requires the player to gather information about every alien race in the game, and certain triggers have to be activated a number of times, as in the case of the Seriously achievement in *Gears of War* (Epic Games, 2006), which requires the player to get 10,000 kills in multiplayer matches.

The *reward* is the persistent proof that an achievement has been unlocked. Rewards are aggregated somewhere outside of the actual game session, where they normally also are accessible to others. These rewards are typically only symbolic. They cannot be used for anything beyond public display of having completed the corresponding challenges.

Achievements at Microsoft

When achievements were first introduced, they were part of the extended player profiles for the Xbox 360. Although the online service Xbox Live had been around in a simpler form since 2002 (Takahashi 2006, 21), with the new console online connectivity moved from being an experimental feature to being a core aspect of the system. Player account information was expanded from a unique user name across all games (called a gamertag) and a friends list of up to a hundred other Xbox Live users to a public user profile (called a gamercard), including, among other player information, the five most recently acquired achievements (“Description of Xbox 360 Gamer Profiles” 2010).

In the Xbox Live achievement system, every retail game has approximately 50 achievements, and the smaller digital-only games have 12 achievements. Every achievement has a point value (called a gamerscore). The total gamerscore is 1,000 points for a retail title and 200 points for a downloadable game. Beyond that, there are very few guidelines for the developers to follow in creating achievements (Bland 2009; Greenberg 2007). There are, for instance,

achievements just for pressing the start button and even for playing badly (dying or failing repeatedly).

Anyone can look up other players' achievement information on Xbox.com as long as they know the player's gamertag or directly on the console if they have the person in their friends list or in the recent players list. Players can adjust the privacy settings to modify who has access to this information. Players actively promote their identity and gaming history by customizing gamercards for use on websites, blogs, and forums as well as with automated signatures using sites such as MyGamerCard.net ("Achievement Unlocked" 2007), and there are many reasons for doing this. A substantial achievement record can add weight to a forum poster's opinions by showing his or her in-depth familiarity with the topic at hand. The information also says something about a person's gaming interests, which can work as a conversation starter between players who do not know each other and lead to players adding each other to their friends lists and playing together. When a player receives an achievement, there is a sound cue, and a notification pops up on the screen informing the player of the gamerscore value and name of the unlocked achievement. The notification can be disabled together with all other notifications, but the player still receives the achievement.

Achievements were first introduced to the public at the Electronic Entertainment Expo on May 16, 2005. J Allard, one of the driving forces behind the Xbox project at Microsoft, mentioned the feature as part of the official announcement of the Xbox 360. He described them as "sort of a record of everything you've accomplished across your library of games" ("Robbie Bach, J Allard, Peter Moore" 2005). The achievements system had a predecessor within the company in the MSN Games badges, so to locate the origin of the achievements concept within Microsoft, we have to go back a decade to the mid-1990s.

In 1995, Bill Gates wrote a memo entitled "The Internet Tidal Wave," in which he assigned the Internet "highest level of importance" to the whole company ("Letters of Note" 2011). A few months later the Microsoft Network (MSN), a collection of Internet sites and services, was launched. When Microsoft wanted to add an online gaming site to the network, it decided to buy a site called Electric Gravity, which after the acquisition was renamed several times, most notably as The Zone, before it became MSN Games ("Microsoft Online" 2004).

In 2005, around the same time the Xbox 360 was announced, the site went through an overhaul that introduced badges that the players could collect by playing the games on the site. There were four different types of badges. Three of them were awarded for reaching a certain high score, accumulated score, or accumulated number of hours in any given game. The fourth type was known as special achievement badges, which were awarded for completing challenges in particular games during a limited period of time. They had unique names and artwork, which make them significant precursors to the Xbox Live achievement system. On a systemic level, what was new with the badges was that players had to log in with their

MSN accounts, which made it possible to store player records on a central server rather than in the local browser cache, which in turn created the persistence required for a modern achievement system (“Countdown to Badges” 2014).

The introduction of the special achievement badges dates the first use of the word *achievement* to denote this phenomenon back to an announcement made in June 29, 2005, when the Gold Rush challenge for the game *Gold Fever* (Qwest) went live: “Between now and July 26, 2005, every point you earn in Qwest Gold Fever will be counted towards our first-ever special achievement badge ... the GOLD RUSH!” (“Special Achievement Badge Available” 2014).

When Microsoft Games was developing the Xbox Live Arcade service for the original Xbox, which focused on small downloadable games often aimed at more casual players, it worked with MSN Games and some of the latter’s hit games, such as *Bejeweled* (PopCap, 2000) and *Zuma* (PopCap, 2003) were ported over. The experiences from developing the badge system were also useful to the Microsoft Games team in the process of designing the achievement system for the Xbox 360 (“Microsoft Online—from The Zone to Xbox Live” 2004).

Community Reception

When the Xbox 360 was released, the achievement system had a significant impact on player practices. The system was often cited as a competitive advantage for the Xbox 360 console and as affecting both sales and critical reception of separate game titles (Electronic Entertainment Design and Research 2007). A number of websites, online forums, and podcasts were created that focused solely on achievements. Some websites even offered achievement farming to those who were prepared to pay money to “level up” their gamertag. The most prevalent aspect of community engagement with achievements was sharing tips and tricks on how to earn particular achievements, but other topics such as how good the achievements in new games were, how gaming habits have changed since the introduction of achievements, and the organization of leagues and tournaments were also discussed (Jakobsson 2011).

At the same time, a vocal opposition to achievements emerged, consisting of players, journalists, and developers. On forums, in podcasts, and in chat channels, players showing an interest in collecting achievements were often criticized, pathologized, and referred to in derogatory terms. The criticism usually concerned how achievements were “addictive” and attracted attention away from the “game itself” (e.g., Hecker 2010).

In an attempt to reach beyond sweeping generalizations of how players engage with achievements, I conducted a two-year participatory study of the Xbox 360 gaming community. Three different groups emerged with respect to their approach to achievements in the analysis of the empirical material: *achievement casuals*, *achievement hunters*, and *achievement completists*.

It is important to note that these three categories are fuzzy and unstable. Players may inhabit traits from different categories at the same time, and their attitudes and play styles often change over time. The players' own perception of which category they belong to is often inconsistent with their actual gaming behavior, and they are often ambivalent regarding their play styles, noting that they wish they could act differently or that they do not understand their own behavior (Jakobsson 2011).

The first category takes its name from the “casual gamer” stereotype, which is used to denote players who are significantly less invested in gaming than their counterpart, the “hard-core gamer” (Juul 2009). The *achievement casuals* often pay little attention to the achievements until they have finished a game but want to continue playing it. Developers have always provided different ways to optionally extend the gaming experience, such as so-called new-game-plus modes where the player can start over from the beginning with abilities or items carried over from the first playthrough. With achievements, progression past the formal end of the game is made smoother. The story ends, but some achievement is usually within reach of being completed, which beckons the player to continue playing. In this regard, achievements work as scaffoldings that support players who wish to remain in the game world and continue adding to their play experience.

The term *achievement hunter* comes from the community itself and describes someone for whom the achievements have become more important than the games themselves. For these players, it is perfectly natural to play games just to collect the achievements. Old sports games and games aimed at children are, for instance, known for giving easy achievements while not always providing the most exciting gaming experience. *Achievement hunters* sometimes go through the achievement-unlocking process several times for the same game title (a process known as “doubling”) because copies of the game from different regions sometimes give separate achievements. The way achievement hunters approach these games can be compared to playing massively multiplayer online games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), where long-term goals of leveling up and gaining quest rewards can overshadow the emotional investment in moment-to-moment gameplay for many players. T. L. Taylor's statement about massively multiplayer online *powergamers*, who “[t]o outsiders ... look as if they are not playing for ‘fun’ at all” (2006, 71,) fits *achievement hunters* very well.

There is a connection between this category of players and the category “multiuser dungeon” (MUD) players whom Richard Bartle (1996) identifies as *achievers*. The similarity lies in the focus on outcomes of play activities, but whereas achievers are characterized by their focus on overcoming challenges, *achievement hunters* spend most of the time on fairly menial tasks. They always go for the achievements that they can get with the least expenditure of time and effort. They also exhibit traits of other player types. To be successful, achievement hunters need to create a network of friends to trade tricks, games, and game saves, which implies that

they are *socializers* (Bartle 1996). But they also frequently engage in competition between each other, tracking who collects the most achievements overall or within a given time frame, which would associate them with *killers* in Bartle's terminology.

The term *completists* (or *completionists*) is used to describe collectors of everything from vinyl records (Plasketes 2008; Stump 1997) to memorabilia (Henderson 2007). Jenny Robb describes them as being "systematic in [their] approach, collecting everything, or an example of everything, that falls within a certain category" (2009, 249). Video game completists are different in that they are not collecting games but rather items and rewards in games such as unlockable character models (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). *Achievement completists* consider games to be unfinished until they have collected all the achievements. They can spend months playing a game that they have already grown tired of just to get that last elusive achievement (Jakobsson 2011). This willingness to submit to difficult challenges resonates with Bartle's (1996) *achiever* category. Similar to achievement hunting, the struggle to collect everything in a game cannot always be described as fun, but the overall experience can still be very valuable to the players (see Taylor 2006, 88–92). The introduction of achievement systems has made the rewards of the collection efforts more concrete and visible for achievement completists. Olli Sotamaa (2010) connects the external visibility of achievement collection to the concept of gaming capital (Consalvo 2007). The collection represents reputation within the community.

Medals, Badges, and Patches

In tracing the predecessors that have inspired the achievement systems of today, I have focused on symbolic awards that can be used to display some kind of accomplishment or milestone within an organization or in a competition. Achievement systems have also been compared to different types of reward systems, such as frequent-flyer miles (Bogost 2010), but the suggested similarities are in these cases related to the systems' psychological or social outcomes. In their construction, these systems consist of points and scores rather than of badges and patches, and, unlike achievements, they have more than symbolic value.

Decorations used to denote accomplishments within the military are known to have existed as far back as in the Old Kingdom of Egypt around 2000 BCE (David 1982). Modern military organizations usually have intricate systems of medals, badges, ribbons, and so on. Just as with video game achievements, these physical emblems do not always denote accomplishments. The US military decoration the Purple Heart is, for instance, awarded to soldiers wounded or killed in service. It may have been through military practices that medals and other decorations found their way to organized sports, where they now play a significant role, for instance in the Olympic Games.

Badges were originally a heraldic symbol worn as an identifying mark by a knight and his retainers (Gibson, Ostashewski, Flintoff, et al. 2013). The Boy Scouts adapted the concept for their Merit Badges. These badges are of particular interest in the history of accomplishment-based decorations. The Merit Badges have been an integral and important part of the Scouting program since the start of the movement in the United Kingdom in 1907 (“History of Merit Badges” 2014). The merit badges are meant to encourage Boy Scouts to explore topics that interest them, and they are awarded for a wide variety of activities in areas such as astronomy, scuba diving, and theater.

Although the Boy Scouts Merit Badges are meant to signal the pursuit of and adherence to constructive values, some systems work in the opposite direction. Some outlaw motorcycle gangs are said to use a skull-and-crossbones patch to signify that the wearer has killed or committed other acts of violence in service of the club. Sometimes these patches are worn by members who have not actually “earned” them because the patches still fill the intended function of intimidating and instilling fear in outsiders (Queen 2005).

The coercive power of external reward systems has long been used for purposes related to behavior modification (Matson and Boisjoli 2009). Already in 1859, N. H. Avendano y Carderera described a ticket or token that could be used to reward good behavior in children. Since then, systems similar to achievements have been used in schools and in treatment of mental disabilities (Gibson, Ostashewski, Flintoff, et al. 2013). With the recent rise of interest in gamification, or the use of game design elements in nongame contexts (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, et al. 2011), the interest in using achievement systems in education has intensified, but some advise caution against the use of external reward systems in general (Kohn 1993) and of achievements in particular (Nicholson 2014).

In the early 1980s, the US video game publisher Activision started offering similar awards for gaming accomplishments. Mainly for the games it published for the Atari 2600 but also for some games for other platforms, Activision printed special challenges in the game manuals. If a player managed to beat the challenge, he or she could send a letter to Activision, normally with a photo of the TV screen included as proof, who in return would send a decorative fabric patch together with a form letter congratulating the player and welcoming him or her to “the club.” The patches could then be ironed or sown onto a jacket to display the player’s accomplishments in the schoolyard and elsewhere (“Activision” n.d.; “Activision Patch Gallery” n.d.; Thomasson 2003).

Activision in the United Kingdom also offered these rewards, calling them “badges” (“Master Gamers—Free Badges to Be Won” 1984), and the game developer and publisher Imagic closely emulated the concept with its award decals (“Imagic Experts Club” 1983).

The Boy Scouts took the concept of displaying symbols of accomplishments on their uniforms from the military, and Activision used the format of the Boy Scouts badges and



Figure 1.1
Activision patches.

introduced it to a video game context. The Activision system already structurally had the components of signifier, completion logic, and award. What Microsoft did was implement an existing system on a new technological platform. By utilizing the panoptic affordance of the Internet, this system has made a significant impact on modern gaming.

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