How Gamers Find Their Games

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Abstract

This study explores the decision-making process of gamers in their early twenties, asking: What information resources are the most influential in determining whether or not to play, purchase, or learn more about a game? What information activities and behaviours do gamers exhibit during this process? Data is collected from three participants using semi-structured interviews where the drawing of "information horizons" is called on to discern the various information behaviours and activities encountered throughout the process. This study finds that social networking aspects of multiplayer games on online gaming platforms — such as Steam and Discord — are extremely important factors. Furthermore, the findings suggest that gamers exhibit monitoring, unfolding, and browsing information behaviours in the information-seeking process, primarily from online resources. Additionally, through information exchange, advice or suggestions from certain experienced, trusted and familiar sources — such as friends or family — supersedes and takes precedence over the entire process. However, this study concludes that gamers often do not actively seek information about new games, rather gathering it through serendipitous information encounters on information grounds. This is important for video game developers, publishers, and distribution companies in order to understand and design effective information systems for gaming audiences and consumers.

INTRODUCTION

In an era where handheld devices are increasingly popular across all age demographics, video games for leisure are accordingly rising in popularity as well. However, unlike traditional sports and outdoor recreational activities, there are a large variety of video games to choose from.

The main research questions for this study are: What information resources are influential in determining whether or not to play, purchase, or learn more about a game? What information activities and behaviours do gamers exhibit during this decision-making process?

A trend that arises is the influence of trusted or experienced individuals, groups, or knowledgeable and unbiased Internet personalities. In such a way, advice from these resources is considered more valuable than other information sources in the decision-making process. However, participants note that this is a rarity, as usually, they do not intentionally seek to discover new games.

To this end, a second theme is the information-gathering behaviours — such as *monitoring*, *browsing*, and *unfolding* — exhibited by gamers, often through a serendipitous encounter of information.

The final prevalent theme that emerges is that respondents often discover new games from online information grounds.

As someone who spends a significant amount of my leisure time on gaming, I consider myself as gamer. With esports emerging as a viable and recognized profession, I have observed many video games become worldwide phenomena in the gaming community across all ages. With such a wide selection of choice, I am interested in exploring how gamers select their games.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost no information studies regarding video gaming have been conducted. "Video game information needs and game organization: differences by sex and age" by Lee, Clarke, and Kim explores the information needs and game organization behaviour of users, with the intent of studying the design of video game information retrieval and recommendation systems. This study focuses on understanding differences in results between sex and age.

In general, studies regarding ludology — the study of game design, its players, and the role of gaming in society — tend to rely on sociological, anthropological, and psychological perspectives in its examination. One popular example of a ludological study is the examination of the role of video game violence on youth, and the role of violence in video games in society.

While the study of video games at large can be associated with ludology, this study has a different focus. Unlike previous research, this study explores the role of information behaviour and activities exhibited by gamers in the process of discovering and researching new games. Thus, the findings can help create an information-seeking profile of leisure video gamers for purposes such as outreach, marketing, and communication between publishers, developers, distributors, and consumers.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is organized through four sensitizing concepts: Sonnenwald's information horizons and human information behaviour (Sonnenwald, 2005), Erdelez's information encounter (Erdelez, 2005), Hektor's information activities (Hektor, 2001), and Fisher's information grounds (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005).

The primary data collection method used is a combination of a semi-structured interview and Dr. Dianne Sonnenwald's Information Horizon Interview (IHI) (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001). I created an interview guide (Appendix 1) in preparation, with five major questions, which was provided to interviewees in advance.

During the interview, I began with the provided questions, and asked participants to clarify or expand based on their responses. This allowed me to ask additional questions based on each participant's unique experience and perspective. Probing was done by picking out key concepts, phrases, or common themes in the participant's response, and asking for elaboration. Participants were then asked to create information horizons.

For cutting points, I opted not to interview professional or "hardcore" gamers as it would deviate from the "leisure", or perhaps, "amateur" aspect of my research focus. Individuals involved with professional gaming and esports may have different criteria involved in selecting games for leisure activities, and as such, would've been inappropriate in a study for amateur or leisure activities. The population selection was not gender based, but the age was restricted to participants in their early to late twenties.

Furthermore, I wanted my research population to consist of those who actively choose to play video games in their spare time, over other leisure activities. As such, I restricted the age range to target individuals at a particular stage in life in which free time — and thus, time for gaming — tends to be a luxury.

FINDINGS
Trusted entities are the most influential source
According to Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon (2001), one's information horizon represents "the information

resources (including people) they typically access and their preferences for these resources" (p. 1). Consdering this, all participants were asked to rank their resources, and identified a trusted individual or group of friends as the most influential in deciding what game they might play or purchase. "Athos" asserted:

> The majority of my decision-making is [that] I ask my brother. If he gives it a positive review — or I ask my friends and they give it a positive review, only then, will I actually scan through it in detail . . . If my brother says 'no' [about a game], I basically won't even consider it.

Here, Athos identifies his brother and friends as trusted entities whose opinions are valuable information resources. Similarly, "D'Artagnan" stated:

> I put friends who share similar tastes in games as first . . . Basically every game that a friend has suggested to me — or like, *that* specific friend — I ended up buying and really liking it.

Accordingly, he ranks "Friends who share similar tastes in games" as the first of five, in the major information resources (Fig. 1).
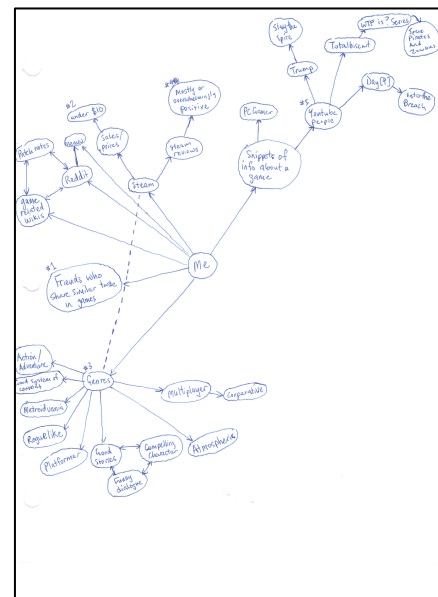

Figure 1. D'Artagnan's information horizon

In contrast, "Aramis" has a more direct, evidence-based approach. However, he also notes that a friend's prior experience of a game heavily influences his final decision — bypassing the entire process (Fig. 2).
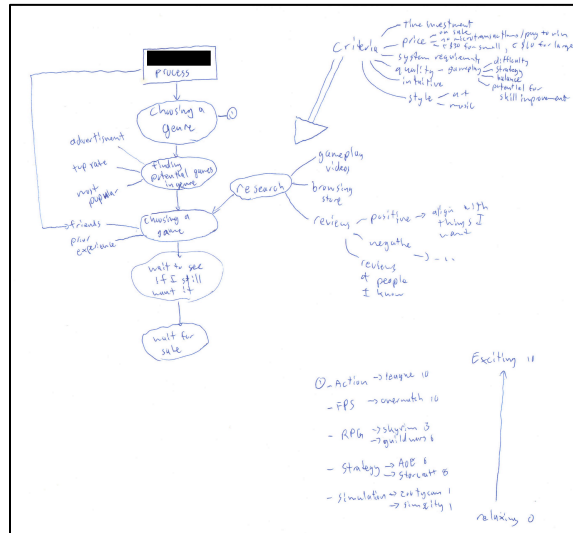
Figure 2. Aramis' information horizon

Ultimately participants agree that trusted entities are the most valuable information resource, often with significant influence on the final decision.

Participants rarely seek new games

All participants note that they do not actively seek to discover new games, rather gathering information through chance encounters. When asked about discussing new games with trusted individuals or groups, D'Artagnan said:

> A lot of people I play [with] or talk to don't usually discuss video games. If it comes up, it comes up. But it's not a very common thing. We usually talk about games that we know each other plays, and rarely talk about other games.

As emerging professionals and students, the participants stated they did not have the time to pursue gaming as more than a pastime or as a leisure hobby — but not for a lack of interest. Yet, participants still encountered information about games through less direct means.

In Athos' information horizon (Fig. 3), he identifies Apple's App Store, Google, and YouTube as ideal sites for information, searching them for objective reviews, gameplay and analysis videos, and to research game features.

For D'Artagnan, he labels YouTube channels, the Steam Store, Reddit, PC Gamer magazine, and game-related wikipedias as online information resources (Fig. 1). Similarly, Aramis has gameplay videos, the Steam Store, and online reviews (Fig. 2).
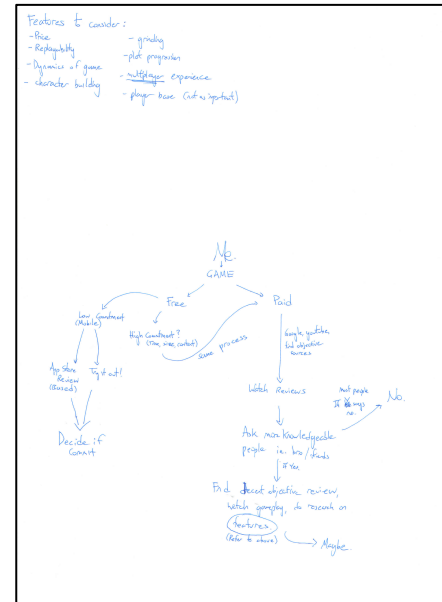

Figure 3. Athos' information horizon

Gamers gather information from online information grounds

Respondents identify Discord — a digital distribution and social networking platform — as a routinely used resource. All participants describe Discord servers (user created voice and text-based chat rooms) as a means to connect and communicate with others of similar interests, or with friends. One example, is D'Artagnan's recount of a specific incident:

> There was one time I was lurking [on Discord], and I saw [my friends] talking about this game I had heard of briefly before, but hadn't played. So I downloaded it and tried it out since everyone else was playing it, and I ended up loving it.

Although the conversation was not directed at D'Artagnan, his routine participation on the server allowed him to discover useful information by reading the public chat log.

DISCUSSION

This study was analyzed in an inductive thematic analysis, through the lens of Hektor's informational activities model (Hektor, 2001), Erdelez's concept of information encountering (Erdelez, 2005), and Fisher's information grounds (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005). Only common themes of information behaviour and activities across all participants were identified.

All respondents described *information exchange* as the key resource for gamers. In Aramis' case, his evidence-based

research approach seemed to indicate a more one-sided process, suggesting *information unfolding* and *browsing* as the primary information behaviours. However, he later indicated that opinions from friends who have experienced the game would have a significant influence on his decision-making process. This was also the case with Athos, his friends, and his brother, and with D'Artagnan and his friends who share similar taste in games. This concurs with Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon (2001), who stated:

> [The] opinions that one's peers hold concerning the value of a particular resource will influence one's own opinions about the value of that resource and, thus, its position within one's information horizon. Interactions with others will make one aware of their opinions, and so are likely to cause changes in one's information horizons (p. 4)

Respondents also exhibited *browsing* and *unfolding* behaviours in their information horizons. Participants included YouTube channels, game stores, and other Internet sites, as frequented online information resources — Hektor's *information browsing* behaviour. However, the line between information behaviours is blurry, as this also qualifies as *information monitoring*. Furthermore, D'Artagnan's identifies three online personalities as his preferred sources of information: Trump, Day[9], and Totalbiscuit (Fig. 1) — watching YouTube videos as an *information unfolding* activity. In this process of *unfolding* and *browsing* these resources with the intention of seeking entertainment, fun, and keeping current with the latest news and game releases, D'Artagnan encountered new games that were reviewed, promoted, or streamed online by these creators.

All participants expressed Erdelez's concept of information encountering in their information-seeking process. Through the course of routine participation on a variety of online platforms, sites, and conversations with peers and family, participants encountered information without intentionally seeking it.

Other times, *information exchange* occurs with the intention of seeking new information. D'Artagnan and Athos, in particular, would seek information from trusted individuals to guide their decision-making. Erdelez would describe this group as "'occasional encounterers' — people who occasionally encounter information but do not see in these events more than a lucky incident" (Erdelez, 2005, p. 26).

Every interviewee described taking part in information grounds in their information-seeking processes. However, participants were not surprised to gather information from Discord servers, Steam, or in-person conversations with friends, family, or roommates. Despite initially joining the Discord server for its voice communication features during online multiplayer gaming, participants found that its chat rooms were a convenient way for other individuals with similar interests to communicate and discuss gaming-related topics. Resultantly, the encounter of information on Discord as an information ground seems to be regarded as an inevitable occurrence.

D'Artagnan's earlier recount described Discord as a platform where *information monitoring*, *unfolding*, *browsing*, and *exchange*. Although the exchange of information was not directed at him, his routine participation allowed him to discover useful information by chance — a textbook example of Erdelez's concept of an information encounter on "information grounds".

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
Explaining the information horizon method to interviewees was the most difficult part. Often, participants would respond, but required probing to draw out the full information-seeking process. I refrained from guiding participants while eliciting their information horizons, and avoided asking them to rank their resources until its completion, believing that my interference might challenge the research's integrity.

Each time I introduced the concept, I was careful to avoid using the words "draw", "map", "flow chart", and "diagram", as it might influence how participants responded. In retrospect, I was overcautious, and participants could have benefitted from more guidance. A possible way to improve the IHI method of data collection for this study would be to emphasize ranking one's "information resources" as the primary focus of the information horizon.

Furthermore, a participant mentioned how connecting the preliminary questions to the information horizon component were helpful in framing the task. Participants further suggested that asking for specific games that they enjoyed was helpful — as it aided in identifying common themes or genres, which in turn, assisted in completing the information horizon.

One ethical concern was that a participant included their name on their information horizon. As such, I redacted the name by digitally covering it after scanning (Fig. 2).

CONCLUSION
At the beginning of this study, I asked: What information resources are the most influential in determining whether or not to play, purchase, or learn more a game? What information activities and behaviours do gamers exhibit during this process?

With no prior information studies research on this topic, there was nothing to directly compare or contrast my findings with.

Prior to this study, I presumed that the information associated with each game — its genre, price, graphics and system requirements, and features — would be the primary deciding factor in the decision-making process. However, this was nowhere close to the truth.

These findings suggest that the most important information resource and factor is the opinion or advice from trusted individuals or groups. Communicated both in-person and online, these exchanges often supersede or bypass the entire information-seeking and -gathering process. However, participants considered this a rarity.

More often than not, participants gathered information through the course of other routine activities, such as browsing Reddit, Discord, Google, or YouTube. They encountered useful information by serendipitous chance, rather than actively seeking to discover it.

Notably, these information behaviours and activities occurred on online information grounds where gamers frequently participated in. Particularly, respondents observed that game developers of large online multiplayer games have increased their online presence in order to communicate and connect with their player base. Thus, it is not surprising that game developers and publishers are increasingly employing online marketing and promotion strategies.

Two applications of this study is to aid gamers in finding video games that they can enjoy in their leisure time, and for game developers and publishers to employ effective marketing and promotion strategies to communicate with their player base. However, with smart devices increasingly falling into children's hands at young ages — often, before a child has entered the education system — this exposes children to manipulative advertisements before they are at an age to comprehend the concept and value of money. In some countries, consumer protection laws exist that ban targeted advertisements towards children. Perhaps, now is the time to review, update, and implement such laws and regulations to account for new technologies and online advertising too.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

Joshua Shum is a Master's of Information, Library and Information Science candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information. His areas of interest are in information ethics, information and public policy, community outreach advocacy, and the free access of information. He loves to travel to visit museums, national parks, and historic sites.

APPENDIX 1

1. Hello, thank you for coming here today. How are you?
2. Thank you for participating. I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Jenna Hartel in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. For a course on information behaviour, I am conducting a research study to better understand the information activities and behaviours involved in the decision-making process of gamers in their early to late twenties. Along with you, I have recruited others to participate in an "information horizon interview", which will take around 30 to 45 minutes. Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed at my discretion, and the audio will be deleted after the completion of this study. The names and any identifying information of yours or any others that may come up through the course of this interview will be removed from the transcript and any other relevant materials, which will be kept indefinitely and used for the purposes of a class assignment. The results of the research may be published, but your anonymity will be assured. If you have any questions or concerns, please email me at

3. This interview format isn't strict, so feel free to ask questions throughout the process, and add on as you see fit. I will be prompting you with additional questions as we go along, so please feel free to just say whatever it is you're thinking.
4. If you do not have any other questions, shall we begin?
5. So tell me a bit about your relationship with gaming. How and when did you get started?
   a. Can you tell me a bit about why you continue to play games now?
   b. How often do you play games?
   c. What genre of games do you play? Could you list some example of games that you currently play?
6. Could you think of a time where you recently needed information about new games to buy or play?
   a. What information did you need?
   b. What resources did you turn to/seek?
      i. How important or influential are these sources to you?
      ii. What about [online/offline] resources?
      iii. Are there any people, authority figures, or Internet personalities you turn to for information?
   c. Were you satisfied with what you found?
   d. If not, what did you do next?
   e. How did this information influence your final decision?
   f. If given a similar scenario, would you do it this way again? If not, how?
7. In general, what is the hardest information to obtain when making a decision?
   a. Could you tell me a bit more about that? Why is this information essential to your decision-making?
   b. What makes is so hard to find?
   c. What do you do usually do to find that information?
8. What features do you look for in games that you play?
   a. How do they factor into your decision-making process?
   b. So you mentioned [feature], could you go a bit more in depth about that? Why is this important to you? How does the inclusion or exclusion of this feature ultimately affect your decision?
      i. How does price factor into this?
      ii. Do you have a gauge for time commitment required?
   c. What features in video games might deter you from playing or buying them?
   d. Let's talk about single player versus multiplayer games. How does your criteria change?

9. How important is it to have a gaming community you can participate/interact with?
   a. How important is it to have consistent and frequent contact with developers?
   b. How important is it to be able to provide meaningful feedback? Do you expect developers to see and act on it? If so, could you elaborate what is a fair and just system?
10. Now, I want you to imagine that earlier scenario, and demonstrate your entire process from top to bottom — from when you begin seeking or gathering information about a game, to the point where you make the decision regarding whether or not to buy, play, or find more information about the game.
11. You might want to start with putting yourself — please remember to avoid using your name — somewhere on the page, and show how you might begin and move through a search. Please tell me about it as you draw it.
   a. So what happens from here? Do you make your final decision?
   b. You previously mentioned [response]. Where does that fit in to here?
   c. Is there a certain preference you have regarding information resources? Could you rank and label them on the paper?
   d. I noticed you put [response]. Could you expand a bit more on what exactly you mean by this?
12. Well, I think that just about finishes up what we need here. This has been hugely helpful. Do you have any questions or concerns?
13. Great. Now, just as a reminder, your name and any identifiable information will not be used, and redacted if necessary. If you wish for me not to use your responses, it's absolutely no problem, so just let me know. Once again, you can reach me at my email, joshua.shum@mail.utoronto.ca and my professor's email is jenna.hartel@utoronto.ca. Thank you so much for your time.

APPENDIX 2

[1. Are there any people, authority figures, or Internet personalities you turn to for information?]

Athos: The majority of my decision-making is [that] I ask my brother. If he gives it a positive review — or I ask my friends and they give it a positive review, only then, will I actually scan through it in detail . . . If my brother says 'no' [about a game], I basically won't even consider it.

[2. How important is it to have frequent or somewhat consistent contact with developers?]

D'Artagnan: There aren't many games that I played that have a sort of direct contact with developers, usually there's some kind of professional barrier. But one game where there was a lot of developer back-and-forth was Terraria, and that's in the sense that, on the Terraria

subreddit itself, the developers go there very frequently . . . that's partly due to the fact that it's kind of a tighter-knit community, and also [because] Terraria's subreddit is probably one of the nicest places I've been on Reddit. So as a result, devs would regularly post spoilers, teasers, and comment and response to questions and such . . . but in general, developer communication isn't very necessary. But it is nice, especially if the community is tight knit.

[3. Could you rank them by order of what source is the most important or influential to you?]

D'Artagnan: If I was going to [rank] them, I put friends who share similar tastes in games as first . . . Basically every game that a friend has suggested to me — or like, *that* specific friend — I ended up buying and really liking it.

[4. So you previously mentioned Discord. Where does that fit into all this? What happens here that makes it an important resource to you?]

D'Artagnan: There was one time I was lurking [on the gaming Discord server with my friends], and I saw [my friends] talking about this game I had heard of briefly before, but hadn't played. So I downloaded it and tried it out since everyone else was playing it, and I ended up loving it.

[5. You mentioned time commitment, could you go a bit more in depth about that?]

Athos: So like, size of content is correlated. Like Guild Wars 2 — that's like huge size, huge commitment. Cause the download itself is huge, right? Compared to something like those stupid little games like Crossy Road or what not...

[6. What about game stores reviews?]

Athos: App Store reviews are very biased — I want you to know that. But it's still funny…the biased ones are usually the paid ones. Like, I don't know why this [game] is up here, it's crap, and it's actually horrible, like Kingdom Fighters or whatever. They put a *lot* of money into advertising and they get huge amounts of players for stupid reasons.

[7. Where do you look, for online reviews?]

Athos: Because it's such a brief search, I just Google it or YouTube it, but it has to be relevant [and not just has] a lot of views. Like, you can't do that. A lot of it I can understand is just hype. So I take it with a grain of salt.

[8. How important are computer graphics are you?]

Aramis: It depends on what it is. There are some games that's known for its computer graphics, and there are some games known for its gameplay. Like, some are like watching a movie, but it's interactive, and some is all about the gameplay. If I'm paying a lot of money for it, I expect the graphics to be good, but if it's like ten bucks, then it doesn't really matter.

[9. What features do you look for in games?]

D'Artagnan: Adjustable graphic settings, because I like to record a lot of things, and my computer isn't exactly the best at that. So if I'm able to record the game, and have it look — at least — sort of presentable to the audience, then that's a win-win for me. Even in general if I'm not recording it, I'd like to be able to adjust the video settings because I personally don't feel strong about having pretty graphics, and I'd [set it to the lowest settings] if it makes the game run faster.
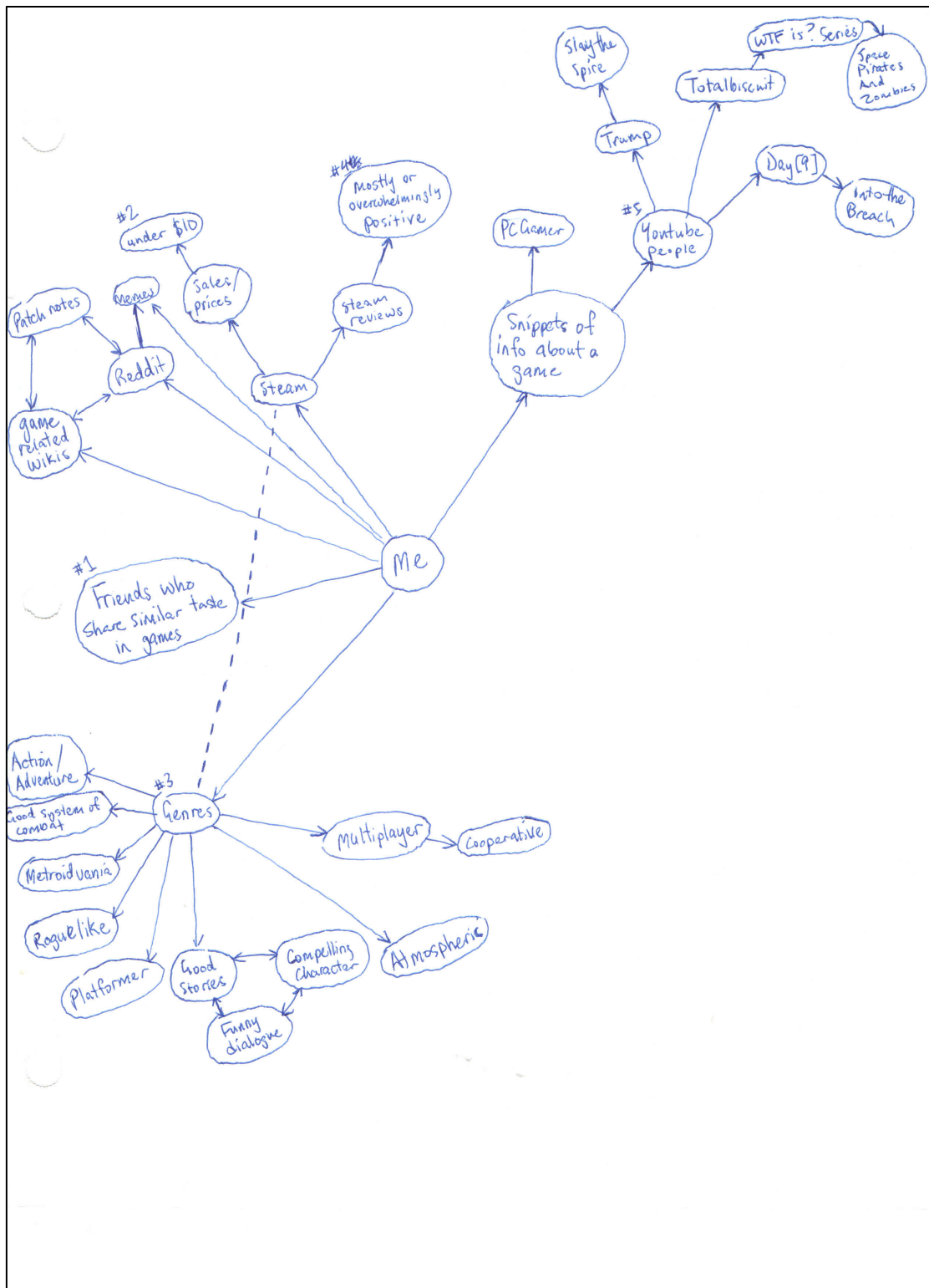
APPENDIX 3
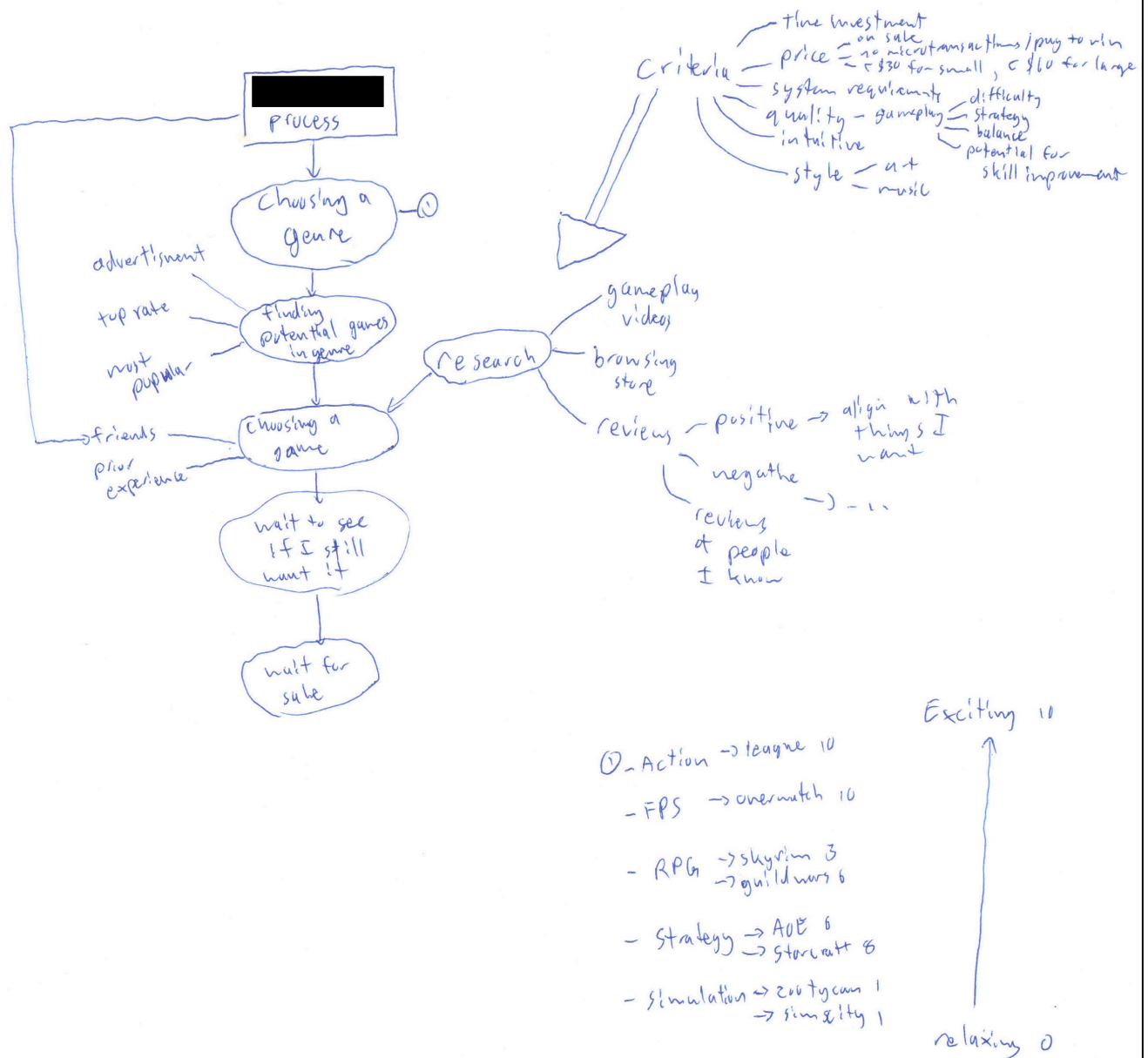

Figure 1. D'Artagnan's information horizon

Figure 2. Aramis' information horizon

Features to consider:
- Price
- Replayability
- Dynamics of game
- character building
- grinding
- plot progression
- multiplayer experience
- player base (not as important)

Me.
↓
GAME

Free   Paid

Low Commitment
(Mobile)

High Commitment?
(Time, size, content)   same process

Google, youtube,
find objective
sources

App Store
Review
(Biased)   Try it out!

Watch Reviews

most people
If he says
no.   No.

Decide if
Commit

Ask more knowledgeable
people ie. bro/friends

If Yes.

Find decent objective review,
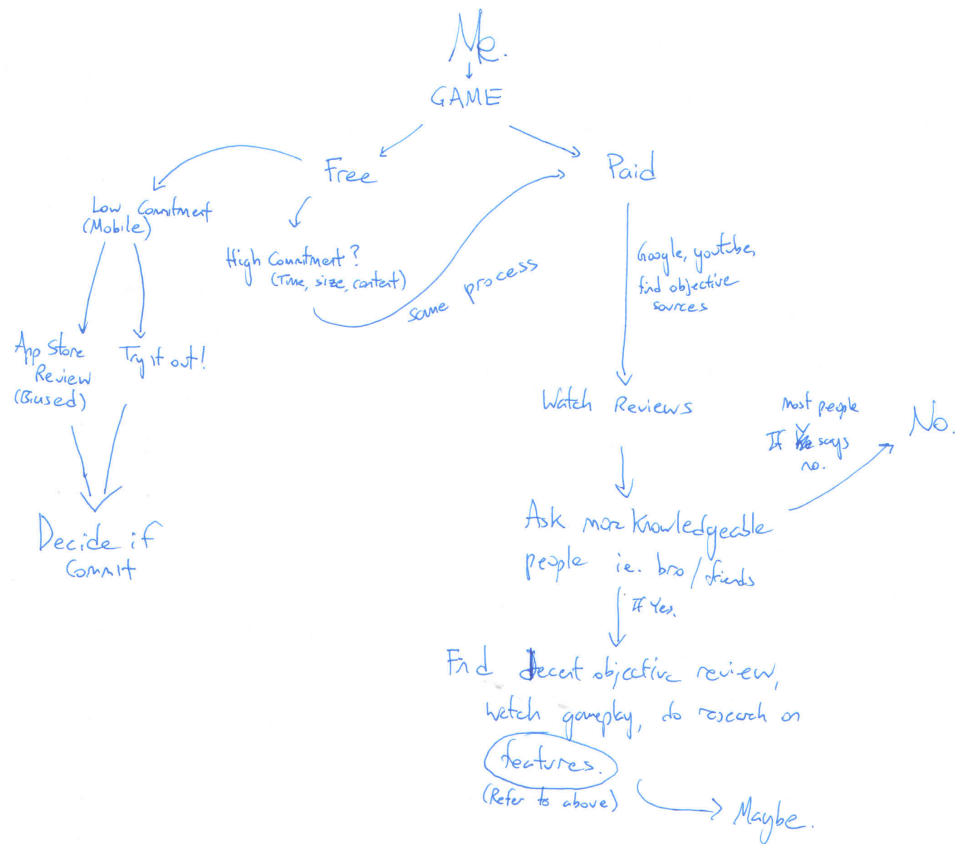watch gameplay, do research on
features.
(Refer to above)   → Maybe.

Figure 3. Athos' information horizon