The Impact of Self-Handicapping in Strategic Board Games Upon New Player’s Experiences

Laura Kopczynski & Emily Smith (Dr. Douglas Maynard, Psychology)

Introduction

Self-handicapping in a game occurs when a more experienced player “eases up” or does not actively pursue victory when teaching a new player, usually with the goal of allowing for a more even playing field. We hypothesize that, in general, self-handicapping enhances the new player’s gameplay experience by making it easier for new players to learn the game, which should increase new player effort, enjoyment (positive perceptions of the game), and self-confidence with the game. We also hypothesize that these positive effects of self-handicapping will be stronger when the experienced player self-handicaps in secret, without the new players’ knowledge.

In order to test this hypothesis, we have developed an experiment in which an experienced confederate teaches an unfamiliar board game to a participant and then plays under one of three randomly assigned conditions of self-handicapping: none (control), overt and covert. We implemented a behavioral measure of positive perceptions of the game by having the participant submit a raffle ticket to win either the played game or a similar game.

We are sharing preliminary results based on our current data, however collection is not complete and these results are not final.

Materials and Methods

Participants:

Students (N = 35) at SUNY New Paltz recruited through the Psychology Subject Pool. Most were 18-23 years old, with roughly equal numbers of males and females.

The Experiment:

A confederate, experienced with the game The Builders: Middle Ages, taught and played with participants under one of 3 randomly assigned conditions of self-handicapping: none, overt, and covert.

Variables/Conditions:

Control: Experienced player plays the game normally without self-handicapping.

Overt Self-Handicapping: The confederate limits the cards they can choose during gameplay and announces this (“Since you’re playing the game for the first time, I’m going to go easy on you”).

Covert Self-Handicapping: The confederate self-handicaps but without announcing the self-imposed limitations to the participant.

Post-Game Survey Sample Items (7-pt. Liker Scale):

Enjoyment: “I had a good time playing The Builders.”

Self-Confidence: “I think I could do well in this game if I played it a second time.”

Effort: “I tried my hardest to do well and win the game.”

Motivation to Replay: “I would like to play this game again sometime.”

Our original research team playing with The Builders: Middle Ages.

Results

To test our first research question we performed one way between subjects ANOVAs using various composite and individual variables (described above) and the self-handicapping condition of the confederate. We found that the condition had a significant effect on the items “I had a good time playing The Builders” [F(2,32) = 3.478, p = .043] and the 2-item measure motivation to win, [F(2,32) = 4.942, p = .013]. Sidak post hoc tests showed that the significant difference for both of these variables was between the control and covert self-handicapping conditions only.

More broadly, teaching new games to people may help foster positive experiences. Playing board games is a method of having a face-to-face interaction with another person, particularly when instruction is involved. This sort of exchange is valuable and has an important place in today’s technologically-oriented world.

Discussion

We were surprised that variables measuring enjoyment of the game experience did not differ amongst the three handicapping conditions. The confederate’s handicapping behavior, even when overt, did not affect participants’ ratings of the experience or their motivation to play again. Ease of learning didn’t have any significant differences but this makes sense because the teaching of the game was not altered between samples.

There are several potential factors that may have influenced the results of this study. Our 3 confederates likely have different levels of skill in teaching and playing the board game. However, because of a similar amount of training, we don’t believe that the difference is significant enough to affect the results. The self-handicapping restrictions may not have been severe enough, because the confederates still won a majority of the time. More severe self-handicapping may have made participants more aware that it was happening in the secret condition, however.

Finally, our choice of board game might have affected the results of our study. This game has a fair amount of chance, such that our confederates did not always win in the control condition when they were not self-handicapping. Some of the rules are also somewhat complex and led to confusion for some participants; in future replications, we may remove some of these requirements. We also reduced the number of points needed to win which made the game quite short. Some participants commented that they would have liked it to be longer.

Selected references


Acknowledgments

Student Association Research Grant Application at SUNY New Paltz Research Foundation

Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activities

Our wonderful confederates Jackie, Sam and Victoria.