Is Couch Co-op Dying?

Can Local Cooperative gameplay still be an enjoyable experience compared to the on-going success of online multiplayer?

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ABSTRACT

This paper will take look into the two modes of co-op; local and online, we will look into the history of the two modes of co-op and where it originally started, we will also be looking into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the co-op genre in terms of sales and how we have adapted co-op to this pandemic. We will also look into the different genres and identify how they are used in current games using three key players which use the co-op differently to each other, using online research we will take a look into how local co-op keeps up with the fast advancement of online and how games demographics can impact co-op sales.

This paper will investigate the unique selling proposition of the three key players used and how they work in their current co-op mode and their initial target audience, we will take a look into the technical side of co-op and how both local and online are able to run using computer networks. Finally, we will conclude the paper with my opinion on the future of both co-op modes and how this research paper will support my team product.

Keywords

Co-op, Local, Online, Multiplayer, Cooperative, Gaming, Local Area Networks, Wide Area Networks

1. INTRODUCTION

For this paper, I will be researching the differences between the local cooperative experience which has created fun memories over the years and the huge ever-expanding online multiplayer, where players can play with anyone around the world. My aim is to compare the two genres of the cooperative experience of gaming and finally, I will be answering the ultimate question, is local multiplayer still as enjoyable as the memories we hold of it or is online multiplayer the future of cooperative entrainment in Video Games.

Ultimately what is co-op? Cooperative, also known as co-op is a feature in video games that allows players to work together or against each other depending on the gameplay mechanics. Over the years co-op gameplay has gained popularity in many game genres such as shooters, sports, or even real-time strategy.

Our product aims to include a cooperative feature to allow players to enjoy our game together and create fun experiences with our product, the end product will feature either a local cooperative experience, an online multiplayer or ultimately include both genres of co-op.

2. FIELD

Not every game featured a local cooperative experience or even an online multiplayer feature, the history of co-op gaming has its roots back in the arcade glory days of Atari's Fire Truck (Roth, 2018). Fire Truck was a black-and-white arcade game released in 1978, according to GamesRadar, it was the earliest video game with cooperative gameplay where two players are forced to work together.

Online games have been around for just as long as local co-op games, with the fast advancement of the internet allowing more and more people to enjoy the new technology. Video games consoles like the early release of Famicon Modem released in 1987 or the PlayStation released in 2000 allowed for games like Counter Strike released in 1999 and Quakeworld released in 1996 to include for online features due to the advancement in console technology using the internet. In fact, it is only in recent years that online multiplayer is becoming the best choice for cooperative gameplay compared to local co-op.

Since lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020 around the world, video games have seen a surge in popularity during the pandemic as social distancing keeps people in their homes (ResearchAndMarkets.com, 2020). Multiplayer games have seen a huge increase in interest, allowing people to connect with friends and family from a safety distance and still have an enjoyable experience. Online games such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and the popular Battle Royale, Fortnite have seen a huge increase in players in March, Modern Warfare had an increase of 159% monthly users, totaling at 62.7 million players in March. Fortnite introduced a new violent-free game mode called Party Royale, the new mode enabled players to socialize on a separate island, the popular Battle-Royale also held in-game concerts featuring Travis Scott's Astronomical event which had 12 million attendees.

3. KEYPLAYERS

3.1 Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga is an action-adventure video game based on the original and prequel trilogies of the Star Wars franchise, the video game was released on 6th November 2007 and revolutionized the local cooperative experience playing video games.

The developers, Travellers Tales, developed The Complete Saga in response to the success of the original game and its sequel with LucasArts publishing the game (Wikipedia, 2007). Both the original game and current game included local co-op but not online multiplayer, you could say the reason why

multiplayer was not included in the game was that the online technology was not sufficient enough for the Lego title. The game was resounded for its fun cooperative experience and make an everlasting impact on gamers around the world.

In the Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition released in 2009, the book ranked the game as the 23rd greatest video game of all time, in that same year, the video game was the fourth-highest selling title on the Wii and ninth for the DS. The games on all the consoles the game was released received aggregate score of 80% on Metacritic and the same on GameRankings. Ultimately the game received overwhelming positive review scores, one review stated the game as, "Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga is a solid game, and one of the rare titles on Xbox 360 and PS3 that the family can safely sit down together to play." (Geddes, 2020)

3.2 Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout

Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout is a platformer game including the new and popular game mechanic, battle royale. The video game was recently released by Devolver Digital and Mediatonic on 4 August 2020, the video game was praised by critics and gamers around the world.

The fun and chaotic video game was like no other on the current game market, Fall Guys takes inspiration from classic game shows such as Takeshi's Castle, It's a Knockout and Wipeout. The game features classic battle-royale mechanic which is featured in recent games like Fortnite and Warzone, Fall Guys has up to sixty players compete in multiple mini-games with the last match crowning the last player standing as the winner, GamesRadar review of the game stated "The battle royale genre has seen so many success over the past three years, and by fusing it with a frenzy of party game elements, Fall Guys has rewritten the rule book like non before it" (Delaney, 2020)

Fall guys received an overwhelming reception when released in August 2020, the peak amount of players for its lanach month was 172, 026 players, after its first week of release the game sold 2 million copies overall on Steam. As the game sold brilliant in it's first few days of release, Fall Guys had 23 million hours streamed by viewers on the popular streaming service, Twitch. The game has lost some of its players over the past month but still manages to have a peaked amount of 83,964 players over the last 30 days.

3.3 Call of Duty: Black Ops

Call of Duty has released a new title every year, ever expanding the franchise and taking steps into different eras of time with World at War set in World War Two, Modern Warfare set in our current time and Advanced Warfare set in the not too distant future, for this paper I will be focusing on one of the classic Call of Duty's Black Ops. Black Ops was released in 2010 by the developers, Treyarch and the publishers, Activision, the first-person shooter was released worldwide on PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and the Wii. Black ops is set in the 1960s during the Cold War, the game had threes modes to play on release; Campaign which follows CIA agent Alex Mason, Multiplayer which put players in different styles of deathmatch modes in a variation of maps and Zombies, which puts up to four players in a fight to the death with endless hordes of zombies.

Unfortunately, the campaign was a solo mode which didn't allow a co-op feature unlike the other two modes in the video game, although the multiplayer experience for Black Ops was predominately an online experience, this mode allowed for up to two player split-screen, these two players can play together against other players online which was a fun feature to have, mixing both the local and online experience together. Finally, Zombies mode allowed up to four player split-screen which is also the max limit of players for the mode, similar to the multiplayer, the mode allowed for spilt screen and online to work side by side, one of my fondest memories is playing with a friend at a sleepover then joining my other two friends who lived up country.

After the games release, Black Op's received mostly positive feedback on all reviews received, all platforms gave the game an average of 82 out of 100 on Metacritic, one review of the game stated "Treyarch's latest is a white-knuckled action romp that doesn't disappoint" (Ahearn, 2012). Using the sale figures of the latest Call of Duty games up to October 2019, Black Ops was the best-selling title of the franchise.

3.4 Summary

Over the years, local co-op has fell behind online multiplayer, the idea of multiplayer becoming the dominant co-op experience is because of two reasons.

- **Advancement of Games Graphics and Engines** – over the years, we have seen games graphics advance from the simple 2D art style to deliver realistic experiences and improved 3D models, these new technologies have caused split-screen to put more strain on the console as the game tried to render a detailed world from multiple perspectives at once (Gailloreto, 2020).
- **Advancement of Online Technology** – With the increase of online technology for consoles, split-screen modes were no larger [**sic**] mandatory for games that wanted to include a strong multiplayer experience (Gailloreto, 2020).
- **Profits** – Video games which included a four player split-screen mode meant only one of players would have to own a copy of the game compared to a game which used online multiplayer, where every player needs to own a copy of the game. For this reason, companies who have developed great split-screen games such as Halo, discarded the local co-op experience in their recent title, Halo 5 Guardians.

After popular demand for the couch gaming experience, the Halo franchise will be bringing back co-op in their next installment, Halo Infinite. There has been an increase of Indie games including local co-op in their recent titles such as Cuphead, Overcooked, Broforce and much more, this move for local co-op in their games was possible due to their retro graphics or the games using a top-down camera perspective.

With the advancement of multiplayer over the years, some local co-op games have tended to focus on an all-age audience as its general demographic, whereas online has moved towards big shooters or games which sometimes do not suit the younger audience. Using the current top five best-rated games on Xbox for both genres, you can see that best rated local co-op games have been like the multiplayer best rated games but have games for a younger audience.

Rating Order	Local Co-op	Online Multiplayer
1	Minecraft	Minecraft
2	Borderlands: Collection	Borderlands: Collection
3	Disneyland Adventures	Tomb Raider
4	Rush: A DisneyPixar Adventure	Dark Souls
5	Gears 5	Gears 5

Figure 1 – Table to represent Xbox's current best rated local or online co-op games in order of one to five.

3.5 USP

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga has a great co-op system in place, all the family can sit down and enjoy the experience with no background knowledge of how to play or the previous knowledge on the films included. The game tells the stories of the films within its game with some laughs here and there. The target audience for the game is unique among the rest of the key players used in this paper, the target audience is mainly a younger audience but all fans of the films, young or old can enjoy the game and all have the same enjoyable experience. Lego Star Wars USP (Unique Selling Proposition) is the Star Wars franchise popularity and the fan service the game offers

Fall Guys is a unique take on the battle royale genre which has taken great shape in recent titles, the average battle royale games are all shooters which are not suited for a younger audience, Fall Guys is different to the average royale game. The game's target audience is suited for all ages appropriate to online games, from silly moments and cute art style to its dramatic moments and heartbreaking moments, the game is a great experience for all players. The USP of this fun title is the new different take on the battle royale genre, the game can show that battle royales don't always have to be about the average run and gun.

Black Ops is a unique take to the cooperative gameplay experience compared to the two other key players, unlike Lego Star Wars and Fall Guys, Black Ops is successfully on blending the two styles of co-op together to work hand and hand in its two modes which offer co-op. Unlike the other key players used, Black Ops is suited for ages over the age of 18. The USP for Black Ops and similar Call of Duty's is that the franchise is successful in blending the local and online co-op experience together and delivering a great experience.

3.6 Technologies/Approach

3.6.1 Cooperative Gameplay

The technical side of co-op is multiple users on either separate system such as multiplayer or local systems like co-op, in a single game being run by a single host user. Due to the complexity of video game coding, co-op games rarely allow network players and local players to mix. Exceptions do exist, however, such as *Mario Kart Wii* or *Call of Duty Black Ops*, which allows two players from the same console to play with others online (Wikipedia, 2015).

The co-op gameplay mechanic has had an increasing popularity over the years with advancement of new technology to allow better connectivity of the inclusion of more players in a single game such as the popular game genre, battle royale.

3.6.1.1 Local

Local co-op is a version of the cooperative gameplay mechanic that allows people to enjoy video games together on the same system with the option of split screen functionality depending on a game's design. An example of a local co-op game is Goldeneye, the James Bond game released in 1997, the game allows for split-screen of up to four players, competing in different types of deathmatch games.

A local co-op game would be in my opinion, a game which involved a good set of game mechanics which flow well with the local experience, you can't have a fun co-op game if the mechanics don't work well with the co-op gameplay. I believe to make a good co-op game you need a minimal amount of UI (User Interface) and simple but fun graphics, if there is too much UI then it can be hard to view the small screens which split-screen gameplay offers, if you got triple AAA standard graphics then it could be hard to appreciate the look of the game if you are playing on four player split-screen.

3.6.1.2 Online

Online co-op, also known as multiplayer is a version of the cooperative gameplay mechanic that allows people to enjoy video games with other players from around the world, this type of co-op does not limit the amount of people playing. An early example of an online co-op game is World of Warcraft (WOW), the game runs multiple servers at once, these servers can hold up to 3.5k-4k players simultaneously, the most amount of active players on the game stands at 12 million.

An online co-op game would be in my opinion, a game which has a reliable online feature from launch, we have seen games such as Battlefield 4, which had issues that the developers, DICE had to delay the launch of their first expansion to focus on fixing the online issues. Although it is hard to deal with online issues when releasing to a large market, if online co-op is a core concept of the game, it should be fully functional before launch.

3.6.2 Local Area Networks (LAN)

A local area network, also known as (LAN) is a computing network that interconnects devices within a limited area, ultimately Wide Area Networks (WAN) tend to be the best choice of network due to accessibility. LAN used to include technologies such as ARTNET, Token Ring and AppleTalk but the most common technologies used in today's LAN networks are technologies such as Ethernet and WiFi.
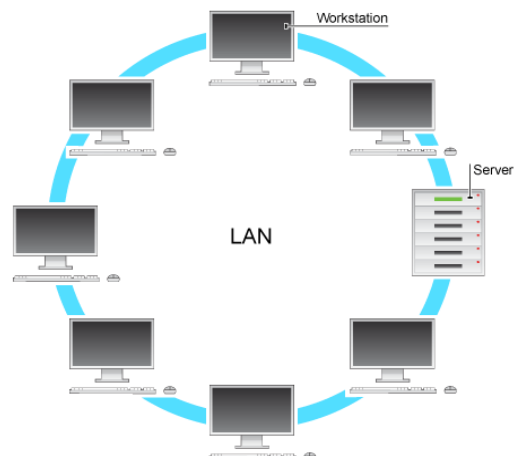
Figure 2. Representation of Local Area Network (LAN) as a diagram to represent how multiple devices connect to the same server (Router-Switch, 2018)**.**

3.6.3 Wide Area Networks (WAN)

A wide area network is a large-scale computing network of information which is not set to a single location, the network can extend to a large geographic area. This type of network can share communications and transfer information between devices around the world using a WAN provider, WAN networks are part of our everyday lives, the internet is often referenced as the largest WAN in the world. WANs are essential for online multiplayer games such as Call of Duty or World of Warcraft (WOW).
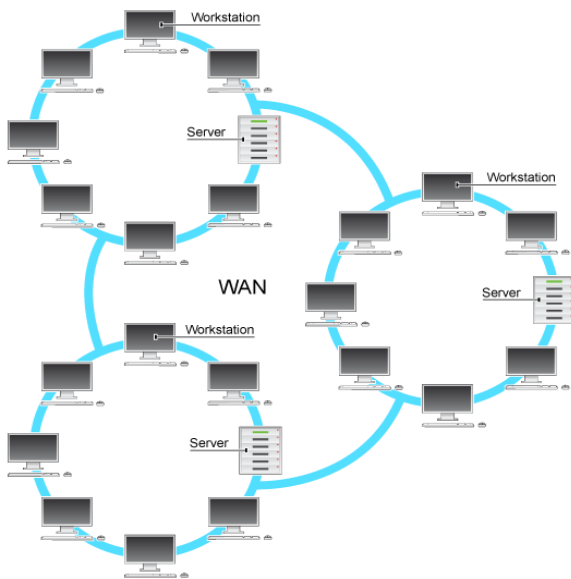

Figure 3. Representation of Wide Area Network (WAN) as a diagram to represent how multiple devices can be connect to multiple servers (Router-Switch, 2018)**.**

4. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, I believe despite COVID, there is a future for both local and online co-op, with new games releasing advanced graphics every year, local co-op cannot give the same detailed look of those games while in split-screen, that's why online co-op is best suited for these high demanding games. Although the online co-op is best suited for the graphics demanding games, there is an increase of indie games with minimal graphics which incorporate the local co-op mode nicely, the games market has seen an increase of these styles of games over recent years. I believe local and online co-op will be around just as long, but local co-op isn't the best route for fast-paced shooters as it used to be years ago.

For the product my team are developing, both styles of co-op work well with our product idea, the game will use minimal but fun graphics so players will be able to enjoy the game on four player split-screen and not be sat squinting their eyes instead of enjoying the experience. Our product aims are to include online co-op functionality as well as local co-op but local will be our priority to get the experience perfect for the user. Our product aims to bring great experiences and create ever-lasting experiences just like the games we hold dear to us and the couch co-op madness we will never forget.

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