Chapter XXIII
Player Motivation and Understanding Game Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are becoming an increasingly popular recreational activity for social engagement. Transporting players to fantasy realms where they bridge the void between reality and the virtual world, via the creation of their online persona. Since the introduction of “table-top” games in the 70’s, social interaction has been shaped by various game dynamics. Following the evolution of the MMORPG genre, the author investigates the implication of these dynamics on in-game social interaction and personal creativity. Identifying the key drivers in a player’s motivation allows us to understand how different players are affected by the game’s dynamics through research by Bartle (1996) and Yee (2005). Retrospectively these games are being described as immersive due to game dynamics and social content, with a direct intention to increase play. The author also discusses anticipating the occurrence of problematic behavior and addictive nature of the technology.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds are becoming a novel new reality for the establishment of communities and social interaction. In this chapter we will discuss the evolution of MMORPG game dynamics, which constitute these environments. Arguing that game dynamics have evolved to maximize and encourage social interaction and engagement. These fundamental characteristics have become a foundation for identifying player motivation in these virtual-spaces. I intend to use World Of Warcraft® (WOW) (created by Blizzard Entertainment) as a primary example. WOW is one of the most popular MMORPG’s to date. I propose to investigate WOW’s flexibility in character creation and understand how a large proportion of player types and demographics are catered for, with this innovative system. With each player selecting from different attributes to meet an established requirement (game play or otherwise) as identified by Hartas (2005).
We will identify that the Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) environment satisfies Oldenburg’s (1999) criteria for becoming a “third place”, an environment that provides a deep sense of emotional and social engagement. Continuing from research by Steinkuehler (2005) in “The New Third Place: Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming in American Youth Culture”, exploring the affect of these game dynamics in MMO environments, defining whether it increases the playability and addictiveness of online games.

Identifying dynamics that have been introduced into a game’s design to motivate players to continue playing, create new interactions and social phenomena. However the introduction of these dynamics may cause problematic behavior in respect to addiction, player immersion and social interaction. Guilds are a prime example of game dynamics, designed to increase social interaction between players. These in-game communities provide an effective platform to investigate the occurrence of “bridging” and “bonding” between players as described by Steinkuehler (2005) and Oldenburg (1999).

BACKGROUND

When we think of MMORPG’s we usually restrict our thoughts to the last decade where this genre of gaming has really expanded. Predating these preconceptions I explore the origin and history MMORPG’s. Understanding the evolutionary timeline and the context of these games allows us to draw on current gaming functionality, examining the gaming dynamics, their introduction over time and their impact on traditional game design.

TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF MMORPG’S

Role-playing is where participants take on and act out the role of a character that usually has different motives, personalities and backgrounds from the person adopting the role (Waskul, 2006). In the context of Role-playing Games, participants assume the role of a character and collectively create and play out stories. Participants define the actions and behavior of their character within the group. Whether the participant’s actions succeed or fail depends on the rules set out and defined by the games dynamics, which in turn shapes the continuing story for the characters dependent on their actions.

This style of game play was truly defined by Table Top games, in particular Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in 1974 (Wikipedia, 2008), however this fantasy role playing game wasn’t the first of the table top genre. The most obvious precedent to D&D was war games such as Avalon Hill’s Tactics II (1958) (Barton, 2007) and sport simulation games like Strat-o-Matic (1961) (Barton, 2007). Nevertheless in 1974 the public was introduced to something completely new. Instead of replaying historical battles or playing out sporting events, they were introduced to a complete fantasy world populated entirely by fictional characters. The player took on the role of a specific race or class and they played out that character’s life within this fantasy realm. There are certainly game play features adopted from these old games, an emphasis on calculation for example, but also the question arises about how profoundly the development of D&D was based around J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and traditional fantasy literature as suggested by Barton (2007).

The adventurer’s life is structured by guidelines provided by the “core rulebooks”. Playing against the Dungeon Master (DM) the players journey through his domain filled with magic and uncertainty. The adventurers continue through the world; fighting monsters, stealing treasure and outwitting enemies (Waskul, 2006). “Dice are important in these role-playing games; they are the principal means of simulating chance and probability maintaining an element of ten-