Interactions, Delegations and Online Digital Games Players in Communities of Practice [1]

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Abstract

Claims around the blurring of producer and consumer categories and user-creativity are now commonplace in the so called age of Web 2.0. Within digital gaming specifically, efforts to enable players to participate in a cultural economy of user-creativity have become a dominant form of innovation in the industry. Sceptical to some of these broader claims, this paper draws on Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) research and on participant observation study within a MMOG to explore the specificities of "producers" and "consumers" in interaction. The adopted 'communities of practice' framework used to underpin the exploration is introduced and the paper suggests the framework helps to reveal how player actions are carefully scripted and enrolled within developer's aims of embedding 'particular users' (Taylor, 2006). The paper concludes with some methodological observations on researcher and player boundaries and how the 'communities of practice' framework offers a place for the researcher within the "field".

Keywords: Participation and Communities of Practice; Online gaming; Delegation and Responsibility; Researcher Position.

Introduction

Dovey and Kennedy in *Game Cultures* suggest 'Cultural and Media Studies' conceptualization of audiences has travelled a 30-year path from spectatorship, through active audience theory, to the model of participatory audiences established through studies of fan cultures' (2006: 124). This model of participatory audiences may be most readily identifiable with Henry Jenkins' 1992 *Textual Poachers* and it is with Jenkins' more recent insights I open. Jenkins, writing in 2003, suggests 'rather than talking about interactive technologies, we should document the interactions that occur amongst media consumers, between media consumers and media texts, and between media consumers and media producers' (online). It is with the interactions between producers and consumers, or more specifically between digital games developers and those that engage with these games, that this paper focuses. In arguing for the importance of research into players' practices, this article will highlight the importance of emerging player roles, and that commercially-driven design contexts situate players within and regulate such roles. Specifically, Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice provided the framework for exploring these gameplay practices and roles, and will be outlined in detail.

'Prosumers' in the age of Web 2.0

For Kline et al. 'one of the most striking aspects of the [games] industry is the way it incorporates the activity of consumers into the development of games – creating what Toffler terms "prosumers"' (2003: 201-202). The concept of the 'prosumer', while dating back to the 1970s, has a contemporary ubiquity through its associations with Web 2.0, a phrase intended to signal a move in the use of the World Wide Web towards user-creativity and mass collaboration. Examples of this discourse, include *Unleashing Web 2.0: From Concepts to Creativity* (Cover notes for Vossen and Hagemann, 2007) that provides, amongst other things, 'a complete view of Web 2.0 including services and technologies' and 'discusses potential new products and services'. Similarly, in terms of marketing, *Advertising 2.0: Social Media Marketing in a Web 2.0 World* (Cover notes for Tuten, 2008) 'ensures that readers understand the advertising options possible in the Web 2.0 environment, provides examples of companies using these options, and offers guidelines for their application'. These publications firmly engage with potential, specific developments associated with the Internet and the

World Wide Web, and are geared towards unlocking such potential for commercial ends for their readers. Interactivity as a buzz phrase and notions of active engagement are seen as dated when situated alongside contemporary accounts where consumers no longer simply 'actively read' or 'interact'; both processes that at one time were heralded as revolutionary and imbued with potential powers of resistance. The attention instead is increasingly the shift to production and creation.

In 2006 *Time* Magazine told its readers that they were their person of the year, 'for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game' (Grossman, 2006: online). The article went on to state:

We didn't just watch, we also worked. Like crazy. We made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts. We blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped. We camcordered bombing runs and built open-source software. (Grossman, 2006: online)

The age of Web 2.0 is a busy time. There are complex tensions around digital "haves" and "have nots" (see Couldry, 2003) but generally the picture we get in Western, advanced 'knowledge based economies' is that we are very busy creating. Web 2.0, used here as catch all phrase for much more complex shifts and developments it both describes and invokes, has also led to a busy time in media and cultural theory.

In his account of 'The cultural logic of media convergence', Henry Jenkins suggests 'convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences' (2004: 34). Convergence is a distinct concept deserving of specific attention, but is introduced here to signal the transformations around user creativity, enabled by and developed with the World Wide Web. Noting the process of convergence and how 'we are entering an era where media will be everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other', Jenkins offers the following description:

Fans of a popular television series may sample dialogue, summarise episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies – and distribute all of this worldwide via the internet. (2004: 34)

This description offers an illustration of user-creativity and contemporary developments in digital media with which digital gaming is closely bound. Whilst the focus above is on television, these activities ring equally true for digital gaming. The emergence of machinima [2] illustrates practices of movie production, and fan fiction, fan art and soundtracks are similarly all fan practices associated with digital gaming. For Jenkins (2004) the games industry was already a pioneering force in the 'renegotiation' of the 'relations between producers and consumers'. As Jenkins states in relation to gaming:

The major successes have come within franchises that have courted feedback from consumers during the product development process, endorsed grassroots appropriation of their content and technology and that have showcased the best user-generated content. (Jenkins, 2004: 40)

The particular field of digital gaming that this paper is concerned with, Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), certainly engages with these aspects of user-creativity and may be provocatively explored through tracing shifts between producers and consumers.

'You already know all about the MMO phenomenon'

Neil Sorens (2007: online) opens his *Gamasutra* article 'Rethinking the MMO' stating 'you already know all about the MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) phenomenon'. He goes on to note 'the GDC [Game Developers Conference] panels, the rants, the spectacular failures and success, the addictions, the 'Make Love, Not Warcraft' *Southpark* episode, the ubiquitous elves, and especially the profits' (Sorens, 2007: online). Sorens' comments on the presence and impact of MMO games can be underpinned by briefly noting coverage within mainstream news coverage, such as the BBC News article 'MMO games on the rise' (BBC News, 2007a). The scale of MMO gaming was noted in a March 2007 BBC report, drawing on research from *Screen Digest*,stating that the market for MMOGs in the West is 'worth more than $1billion' (BBC News, 2007b). A December 2007 follow-up piece offered information on growth stating, 'at the start of 2007, the number of active subscribers to playing *World of Warcraft* was eight million but by the end of the summer the

number had passed 9.3 million' (Ward, 2007: online). *World of Warcraft* is probably the most well-known example with other notable titles including *EverQuest*, *Lineage*, *Runescape*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Lord of the Rings Online* and, most recently (May 2008), *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*. The last three in this list are reworkings of existing well-known stories and characters. Indeed, in terms of *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*,Conan 'is familiar to many from Robert E. Howard's original stories, the films starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and the many contemporary novels that explored the world of the iconic barbarian', and is subsequently seen as a serious competitor for *World of Warcraft* because it can 'trade on a long history of earlier works' (Ward, 2008: online). A useful overview of the genre with regard to gameplay is offered by Nieborg and Hermes: 'a player builds and trains a character, meets up online with other characters and achieves goals, builds powers and gains symbolic money' (2008: 136). Whilst MMOGs vary in content and structure, the organisational dynamics that require ongoing input from players and developers are generating new player-developer relationships that are common across the genre.

Squire and Steinkuehler approach massively multiplayer online games not just as environments, but as cultures. They define MMOGs as 'persistent social and material worlds, loosely structured by open-ended narratives' that are 'both designed and emergent' (2004: online). Henry Jenkins, drawing on conversations with Squire, notes how Lucas Arts integrated 'would-be *Star Wars* gamers into the design team for the development of their massively multi-player on-line game' through creating a webpage 'early in the design process [where] ideas under consideration were posted for fan feedback' (2003: online). Squire and Steinkuehler (2004: online) elaborate on the opening of discussion boards prior to launch and note that further to receiving feedback, this move was instrumental in 'building a knowledgeable, creative community of players who would drive the game community'. They further outline in their discussion of *Star Wars Galaxies* that player input went beyond content such as quests and missions, and that 'these players would establish community norms for civility and role playing', setting the tone for the *Star Wars* culture. This process of interaction is ongoing and for Squire and Steinkuehler, following Robinson, can be conceptualised as a dialogic negotiation between designer and player. In describing these worlds as both emergent and designed, they describe MMOGaming as a 'joint product of the systems we build and the ways in which people inhabit them' (Squire and Steinkuehler, 2004: online). With Squire and Steinkuehler's (2004: online) approach, there is a recognition that MMOGs arise at the 'intersection of player, goals, expectations and design features'. In generating and maintaining a MMOG, these relationships become fluid and the categories and roles of designer and player, whilst remaining distinct, move together in revealing ways. I now turn to how we can understand the aspects of playing which bring the player into proximity with the developer and how this relationship is constituted. In this respect, this paper responds to Taylor's (2006: online) assertion that 'players *already are* active, creative, and engaged agents within games, though this fact often goes unacknowledged or not structurally attended to'.

Communities of practice

The term 'communities of practice' is probably most recognizable in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on social learning, but has been extended into a wide range of fields including knowledge-management (see Hildreth and Kimble, 2004). In *Cultivating Communities of Practice* Wenger et al. (2002: 4) state, 'communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis'. My interest in extending the concept to audience and reception studies is exploratory and through research I conducted into the educational uses of MMOGaming the concept clearly struck a chord in terms of social learning. Before turning to the social learning resonances, and given the mutual focus on membership and communities, it useful to touch on the interpretative communities perspectives associated with Stanley Fish (1980),

In their overview of interpretative communities, Brooker and Jermyn (2003: 275) note that, whilst 'texts may be open to any number of individual interpretations in general, in practice these interpretations will depend on the viewer or reader's membership of specific cultural communities'. The community of practice approach resonates with interpretative communities in highlighting membership and the significance of contextual frameworks for shaping interpretation. As Schrøder (1995: 338) notes in his discussion of audience semiotics and interpretative communities, 'for Fish an interpretative community is a social and institutional one (as opposed to a semiotic one), whose club-like character is clear from the statement that is it is inhabited by "certified members" (Fish, 1980: 357)'. This is a further key area of connection, and the discussion of 'the domain' below signals that membership is not a loose association but is bounded

by specific factors and that sub-communities with distinctive sets of rules exist. From Schrøder's (1995: 344) work on interpretative communities and ethnography, I follow his distinction between interpretative communities and cultural positionings: 'interpretative communities may correspond to natural sociostructural communities such as the family, but it is their media use alone which defines them as an interpretative community'. Similarly, this study exploring the communities of practice approach is concerned with a particular game playing community rather than, but hopefully not ignorant to, questions of gender, class, ethnicity and generation (see Schrøder, 1995). There are commonalities with interpretative communities around identifying media use and aspects of membership. These points will be touched on throughout, but the main aim in the following is to outline the specific set of concerns and framework for analysing learning and interaction that the communities of practice approach may provide.

The specific focus on learning with a communities of practice approach is significant for alerting us to both the shared interest *and* the 'practices' or documents, information, ideas and frameworks that underpin interaction within the community. Communities of practice, offers a specific framework for examining membership, interaction, learning and the resources that underpin this. These points are embedded within Wenger's (n.d.) outline of the three characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community and the practice. These characteristics will be used a framework to explore the relationships between developers and players in MMOGs. Wenger offers a number of examples of communities of practice, including 'a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school' and 'a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope' (nd: online). My focus in this paper is on online game players *and* developers forming communities.

In the following I make reference to a number of MMOGs and specifically explore the online game *Runesapce*, released in 2001 by Jagex Limited, and the fourth highest subscribed game in the earlier *Screen Digest* report (BBC News, 2007b). *Runescape* generates income both by subscription and advertising and, regardless of payment and subscription, the performance of key roles is undertaken by players. The performance of these roles by players is not for financial remuneration, and particular arrangements and delegations between players and developers emerge. I draw on the communities of practice framework to explore the practices through which players learn *and* the relationships of learning and delegation which are particular to developer-player relationships in this game. This involved entering Gielinor, the fantasy world setting for Runescape, and attempting to make my way through the game as any other player might. I maintained notes on the tasks I undertook and the game-playing experiences I encountered. Through prior knowledge of the forms of collaboration and community, namely clans, distinctive to MMOGs, I identified the communities of practice framework as a means to structure my explorations. As hinted at, this approach was instrumental in highlighting the variations in types of communities, the roles within these, and issues of resources, access and interaction with the developer. In this sense, the observations that follow illustrate my application of the framework. In turn, the emphasis when playing the game was not on a rigid application of the communities of practice framework, but rather on exploring how this concept helps to reveal, in potentially unforeseen ways, extant relationships.

1) The domain

For Wenger et al. (2002: 27), 'the domain creates common ground and a sense of common identity', and 'a well-defined domain legitimises the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders'. Wenger (nd: online) further states: 'a community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people […] it has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest'. The shared domain of interest for any MMOG would be the online world and the practices and associations which make up this world. No linear path must be followed in *Runescape*, and players are free to set their own aims and objectives, questing and undertaking tasks for experience points as they wish. The domain may be identified as the common sharing and exploration of this world. The game may be seen as the largest formation of a broad community of practice and, as I explore, contingent and specific communities may form. At the wider scale, the shared domain for players and developers alike is the online world of *Runescape*. An example of exchange between developer and game players around the shared domain of the MMOG are conventions.

BlizzCon 2008 held in October 2008 at the Anaheim Convention Center is a specific convention for *World of Warcraft* and involves social events and 'Question and Answer' sessions facilitating developer-player meetings. Game conventions may be usefully considered with reference to Barker's (2004: online) discussion of ancillary materials: materials "which shape in advance the conditions under which interpretations" are formed. Within the scope of this article, I can only flag this up and the focus is with game conventions as illustrative of player and developer interactions.

Significant insights into fan conventions as sites of exchange between players and developers can be found in T.L.Taylor's *Play Between Worlds*. In her introduction, Taylor (2007: 6) offers an account of her attendance at an *EverQuest* convention and experiences such as '*EQ* company representatives dressed up as game characters [...] providing puzzles, clues, and rewards'. The *EQ* representatives dressed as characters from the game is a clear reference to the shared domain and the shared sense of identity of being within the *EverQuest* online world. The following account by Taylor of an *EQ* developer's 'Question and Answer' session is particularly illuminating for gaining a sense of a shared domain between developers and players. Taylor (2007: 8) first notes how 'the developers are queried on specific things to improve (sometimes met with boos or clapping from audience members) and the developers reply equally attentive' and that 'it is an instrumental discussion'. She then goes on to describe how:

> The session is recorded so it can be posted on the *EQ* boards later, which produces a feeling that while this is a local conversation, the questions in some ways stand for, are representatives of, the much larger *EQ* community. (Taylor, 2007: 8)

This passage highlights how both the event space and boards are places through which the domain of *EQ* is shaped and configured by players and developers in conversation. With online games, an ongoing dialogue emerges between the players and designers that shape the development of the game. In turn, my suggestion is not that online games are continuously open to change, and indeed the relationship between the players and designers can be one of tension. As Sorens (2007: online) states, MMOGs, or Persistent Entity Games (PEGs) as he names them, are hampered by 'domineering design' that restricts the ability 'for players to affect the game' when 'anything that was not planned for ends up being "fixed"'.

Further to exploring how the MMOG is dialogically negotiated through events and fan boards, careful attention must also be directed to how the domain is configured within the online game space. The broad domain surrounding the game further translates into priorities and tasks performed within the game world by particular agents or staff of the developers and players towards, as this paper is principally concerned, regulating this domain. Taylor (2006: online) frames this question in terms of governance and states that 'the issue of emergent culture through players' productive engagement with a game has yet to be progressively reconciled with design and commercial interests'. In this sense whilst the domain is a common ground, it is also a contested ground. For example, 'there is a long history of protests within virtual world spaces and we can watch how users of these systems often deploy collective action within online spaces as a way of pushing designer and company attention to issues they want addressed' (Taylor, 2006: online). These remarks from Taylor highlight that the domain of the online world can be configured and negotiated, both through activities such as conventions and message boards, and through in-game actions. Such contestation further highlights that this is a domain that holds value and investment for members. In a sense Foucault's (1980: 142) statement 'there are no relations of power without resistance' echoes here, and whilst the emphasis for Wenger et al. is on a 'well-defined domain', this does not preclude such a well-defined domain being the focus of tension and difference.

The game convention introduced above also usefully highlights the community aspect of the communities of practice framework. The domain described by Wenger et al. was the creation of a sense of common identity. This was hinted at above in the comments on the *EQ* representatives in character costume. The sense of shared identity is also clearly articulated by Taylor (2007: 3) when she recounts meeting someone from her server at the *EQ* convention that allowed her to 'instantly feel more of the crowd'. She goes on to state of a later meeting at the event, 'I never really thought of myself as specifically a "Bailerbents player" until this moment where, in a huge hall filled with people, it becomes a shared identity and easy point of connection' (Taylor, 2007: 3). Shared identity and understanding are crucial aspects within the formation of communities of practice as the following section now considers in more detail.

2) The community

The second fundamental element according to Wenger et al. is community - that which 'creates the social fabric of learning' and can be the basis of 'mutual respect and trust' and 'encourages a willingness to share' (Wenger et al., 2002: 28). A willingness to share is instrumental in fostering a sense of community. Wenger (nd: online) further outlines with regard to this characteristic, that 'members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information', and 'they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other'. Further to the "knowledgebase"

provided on the game's website containing a getting started guide and a manual, game-playing members of *Runescape* 'interact and learn' together within the online environment of the game. Within the online game new players, often called newbies, may turn to more experienced players. A number of articles and conference papers on player support practices unpack some of the specifics of these relations. For example, with reference to *Everquest* and in terms of the game-specific colloquial language that emerges, Tosca states that, 'to become easily proficient at this slang requires quite a lot of effort, although it has to be said that, in my experience, advanced players usually never refuse to explain unclear terms if asked' (2002: 348). This instance of a willingness to share is suggestive of a community of practice approach to interaction. This must be tempered however, by acknowledging the way the request is made or the way it is perceived. This distinction is caught up with the terms 'newbie' and 'noob' and some of the conventions and forms of etiquette of online gaming.

The Wikipedia entry for 'newbie' has been marked as requiring clean-up to meet 'quality standards' (for example the entry does not cite its sources), pointing to the colloquial and contextually bound up meanings of the term. A comic strip from Ctrl+Alt+Del (2006) suggests the key difference between newbies and noobs is the willingness of newbies to learn, and that a appreciative and respectful approach will be meet with a supportive and obliging response. 'As players enter the game world', Ducheneaut and Moore suggest, 'they are confronted with a bewildering array of new and foreign concepts' (2004 cited by Adams, 2005: np.). To orientate themselves to the game world there are a number devices and opportunities. Beyond reading the manual, the game world more generally exists as the means to learn. Within *Runescape*, the Lumbridge tutors are in-game characters that offer advice on locations, tasks, and safety in playing the game. They offer advice on skills that players can train at within the game, including combat, magic and cooking. Similarly with *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* 'the "linear" nature of those early levels in Tortage [the island where the player initially "washes up" at the beginning of the game] is where players become familiar with the game world, the abilities of their character and how to play' (Ward, 2008: online). Further to manuals and in-game tutors, players can enter into clans or guilds with other players.

Within MMOGs, clans, guilds and other self-organised player formations provide further support structures for players. In a case study of *City of Heroes*, Adams suggests that, 'very often rules take the form of uncodified conventions and community taboos [and] just as in any culture or community these rules are passed down explicitly or implicitly to players' (2005: online). The passing of conventions within player communities closely resonates with Wenger et al.'s comments (2002) on a 'social fabric for learning' and a 'willingness to share'. In this respect, and not attempting to construct an 'evidence based' for the adoption of the communities of practice framework as an end in itself, the communities of practice framework helps in identifying player practices and interactions with reference the domain of the game and the ways in which players organise and communicate. A further aspect touched on in existing research and that revealingly illustrates the practices, contingencies and motivations for forming communities within MMOGs are Lin, Sun and Tinn's comments on cooperation within 'clan culture' (2003). They suggested from interview data emerging out of a survey of 493 *Lineage* players that 'most gamers feel a need to join a group in order to benefit from various kinds of support they offer' (2003: 292). One aspect they note, that is particularly relevant for my later discussion of player-moderators, is around safety in terms of theft, fraud and bullying, and that membership in a clan is 'viewed as a means of self-protection' (Lin, Sun and Tinn, 2003: 292). Research into the *Ultima Online* MMOG illustrates that particular spaces within game worlds emerge which are instrumental in a community's functions, for example 'guilds like to have their own place to train new members, store items, plan new events' (Koivisto, 2003). A further point Lin, Sun and Tinn make on clans is that 'members are held to certain obligations, and helping and chatting with other members can be very time-consuming' (2003: 293). This point captures the investments of players in a particular community of practice and leads me to some of my own observations concerning *Runescape*.

Further to the Artificial Intelligence Lumbridge tutors, manuals and more experienced players, and specifically relevant for considering player and developer relations, are player-moderators. As the *Runescape* website states:

> Jagex has always worked extremely hard to make sure that RuneScape is a safe and pleasant place to
> play […] to ensure that RuneScape stays such a place, Jagex introduced Player Moderators to the game.
> (Jagex, 'What is a Player Moderator?': online)

The shared domain or interest explicit here between the developers of the game, Jagex, and the player-moderators is the maintenance of 'a safe and pleasant' game world. Whilst many players implicitly play to this end, the player-moderators, alongside the Jagex moderators, possess exercisable powers to mute other players and regulate the game world. The

player-moderators are normal players of the game:

> They still play to complete quests and increase their levels but since they have shown themselves to be a trustworthy and active reporter, they have been invited by Jagex to monitor the game while they are playing and to take appropriate action when they see rule breaking. (Jagex, 'What is a Player Moderator?': online)

Player-moderators do not have to help players and nor are they are specifically charged with assisting newbies. A key criterion for being awarded this status is, however, 'how useful and friendly they have been to other players and any messages sent in to Jagex from other players about their behaviour in the game' (Jagex, 'What is a Player Moderator?': online). The player-moderator holds a position of responsibility that is awarded by demonstrating community to the *Runescape* community.

Player-moderators within the Runescape community

Within *Runescape,* player-moderators are distinguished by a silver crown when they talk. This makes them an easy to identify source to turn to when in need of support and guidance. The silver-crowned player-moderators alongside the gold-crowned Jagex moderators are charged with the task of maintaining the game world as foreseen by the developers. We could thus identify a specific crowned community of practice. This crowned community fits with all the characteristics of associated with communities of practice already described, but with a specific domain or 'common ground and sense of common identity' around the orderly running of the game. Whilst I have steered clear of the term 'audience' due to the complexities (beyond the scope of this paper) of digital game playing as a distinctive form of engagement with media objects, Gauntlett's suggestion on audiences may be helpfully noted here. 'It is the case that audiences are not only a diverse set of individuals' he writes 'but that each individual is complex, internally diverse and often somewhat contradictory in attitudes, tastes and pleasures' (Gauntlett, 2007: 193). The motivations for individuals, having been approached as suitable candidates, to commit to this role and take on these responsibilities are no doubt very unique and personal, and as such the community of practice is again revealed as a dynamic formation that is not fixed or static. Related to this point, a shortfall of the existing research I would note is the absence of accounts from player-moderators exploring their motivations and concerns. This is bound up with issues of anonymity and, perhaps more importantly, that player-moderators are in character and such a line of inquiry from a researcher would be a significant break with and intervention into this fantasy world. This issue of involvement and ethics is addressed in more detail in the later discussion on researcher positions.

The arrangement of player-moderators and Jagex moderators within a distinct community of practice illustrates Taylor's comment that 'designers construct not only a product, but attempt to embed within it particular forms of use and, by extension, particular users' (2006: online). As we shall see, the player-moderator is a vitally important 'particular user'. Whilst Jagex emphasises that player-moderators are still 'normal' players, care should be taken to recognise the very contingent and personal forms of gameplay. Ermi and Mäyrä suggest:

> The essence of a game is rooted in its interactive nature, and there is no game without a player […] If we want to understand what a game is, we need to understand what happens in the act of playing, and we need to understand the player and the experiences of gameplay. (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005: 1)

What stands out for the purposes of this discussion is the importance of understanding the player and all that is unique about their motivations, ways of playing and experiences.

Richard Bartle in his article 'Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDS' explores the four things that people typically personally enjoyed about MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and states:

> Labelling the four player types abstracted, we get: achievers, explorers, socialisers and killers. An easy way to remember these is to consider suits in a conventional pack of cards: achievers are Diamonds (they're always seeking treasure); explorers are Spades (they dig around for information); socialisers are Hearts (they empathise with other players); killers are Clubs (they hit people with them). (1996: online)

He notes that these are stereotypical players and 'not to be assumed to be true of any individual player who might otherwise exhibit the common traits of one or more of the player classes' (1996: online). This is an influential text that

has been reprinted in, notably, Salen and Zimmerman's 2005 *The Game Design Reader*. Bartle's approach usefully illuminates the very personal and different ways of playing games and subsequently how play changes the way the game that unfolds. The player-moderator may be seen as a very particular type of player who is engaged within a specific relationship of trust and responsibility with the developer. In some respects this could be seen as a form of out-sourcing for free the work that the developer should undertake. This nod towards seeing player-moderators as immaterial labour (see Terranova, 2004), brings to the fore the 'construction of a product', the commercial scripts that underpin developer's actions, and the embedding of 'particular users' (Taylor, 2006: online). A key element of the immaterial labour account is that 'labour' is not 'simply appropriated, but voluntarily *channeled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices' (Terranova, 2000: 39). This highlights that player moderation is not exploitative in any straightforward sense, and the trade-off may be seen in terms of status and position or as part of the commitment to this community of practice.

As Lin, Sun and Tinn's comments on self-protection indicate, the online worlds of MMOGs can be seen as a dangerous place. The whitepaper 'Virtual World and MMOG Moderation: Five techniques for creating safer environments for children' by the international moderation company eModeration published in May 2008 states that, 'millions of children worldwide "inhabit" virtual worlds and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)' and the 'organisations that operate these worlds, together with parents, must ensure these environments offer children a positive experience, and devise and implement guidelines that help keep children as safe as possible' (2008: 2). The third moderation technique that the eModeration paper introduces, 'utilise the expertise and experience of moderators', offers some useful points for reflecting on the player-moderators within *Runescape* and the community(ies) of practice of this game. Firstly, as the paper has touched on, 'eModeration has found that simply the visibility of a moderator can be enough to prevent instances of bullying or abusive behaviour' (2008: 70). The wearing of a crown can clearly be seen as an effort towards this end. The second comment captures the sense of community within a MMOG such as *Runescape*:

> eModeration has found that where clear guidelines have been set and the rules are consistently applied, children will very often not only adhere to the guidelines, but also remind other children of them and collectively help enforce the rules. (2008: 7)

The player-moderator plays a vital role in encouraging "mutual respect and trust" and embodies a form of learning, for instance about the rules and codes of conduct, that may be adopted by certain players. Within the scope of this paper and in drawing on the communities of practice framework, it is noteworthy that *Runescape* is a world within which collective learning is an ongoing practice and player-moderators perform a delegated role integral to this domain.

Recalling the earlier comment that silver crowned player-moderators are illustrative of the creation of particular user positions, usefully reminds us that associated with this role are aspects that distinguish it from the 'normal player'. Player-moderators through their behaviour in forums and in game have been elevated within the game hierarchy. As the *Runescape* website description on the role outlines, these players do not receive preferential treatment, extra benefits or rewards. Rather, their commitment to the domain led them to become identifiably bound up with the good order of this online world. As part of this distinctive role, there are identifiable powers and *practices* that are distinct to the role and to this type of particular player.

3) The practice

The third characteristic, the practice, according to Wenger et al. (2002: 29) is 'a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, languages, stories, and documents that community members share'. The already mentioned manual, which is part of the *Runescape* knowledgebase, is the most noticeable document that members share and develop their game-play in relation to. A more detailed discussion of MMOGs and practice is not possible within this paper but could extend to a discussion of the quests posted by players, languages and text forms used to communicate in game and styles of play appropriate to advancing in the game. With reference to the focus on player and developer relations, the delegated role of the player-moderator is in part based on their role as a practitioner of online good order drawing on a repertoire of resources. Wenger (nd: online) suggests a repertoire may consist of 'experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" and that "this takes time and sustained interaction'. It is the demonstrable sustained interaction of appropriate behaviour that allows a player to become a player-moderator. The player-moderator centre on *Runescape* website is a restricted area containing tools allowing player-moderators 'to perform their role more effectively

in the game' (Runescape Fan Club, 'About Runescape': online). These tools, a term common to Wenger's concept of practice and the game developers, include 'Guidelines, Codes of Conduct and a forum for discussing issues that may arise as a group and with Jagex staff' (Runescape Fan Club, 'About Runescape': online).   In this area of the website, player-moderators and staff may meet as part of their specific community of practice faced with ensuring good order. This point highlights, as the earlier commentary on game tensions sought to, how MMOGs as communities of practice are fluid, mutable and comprised in different formations with regard to the shared domain, the game itself.

Wenger at al. go on to state that the practice is the 'body of shared knowledge and resources [that] enables the community to proceed efficiently in dealing with its domain' (2002: 29). The notion of efficient dealing is particularly pertinent here, for efficiency comes from the delegation of duties and the forming of a community of practice including players and representatives of the developers. In the (ongoing) design of this world, steps towards ensuring good order may be identified. This includes the creation of a muting tool, allowing moderators to stop players from speaking in game or posting on the forum. Muting can be seen as resource that ensures that the domain, in this case the good ordered running of the game, is efficiently maintained. It is, moreover, a resource particular to the player-developer relationship. This player-developer relationship may be conceived as a player-designer relationship not in the sense of actual original designers of the game working in game with players, but rather in terms of a responsibility for how that world develops and exists. In this sense there is a design for emergency, and by this I mean that design extends to ways of dealing with emergent behaviour that may cause emergency. Taylor (2006: online), in considering protests in online worlds, suggests that 'we should not overlook […] the ways in which technical constraints are always informed by decisions about what kinds of activities are deemed necessary and legitimate within a space'. In drawing on a communities of practice framework to consider how players enter into relationships with the development staff through designed strategies, it is possible to see that online worlds can be regulated through a community using shared resources to manage their common interest in the maintenance of that world. It may further be suggested that this sense of common interest held by players is further fostered through these resources and involvement in the moderation community.

The communities of practice framework, I suggest, is especially useful for attending to the nuances and subtleties of interaction between players in MMOGs and between the players and the designers/developers who construct those worlds. This paper has sought to offer a snapshot of my engagement with the concept and some of the distinctive findings that emerged through its application.

The notion of community of practice specifically brings to the fore both interactions within the game and wider activities around that game. Defined as 'the social fabric of learning' and 'willingness to share', the notion of 'community' is particularly instructive for to addressing the diverse participants and interactions that configure the online world of the game. In this sense, the common aim of 'a safe and pleasant place to play' brings together a number of individuals with a commitment to this. The player-moderators discussed in this article have overlapping but distinctive priorities, compared to quest-orientated communities, such as guilds, who come together to support each other in advancing and 'levelling up' and for protection against fraud and theft. The moderator in a community of practice uniquely highlights the ways in which responsibilities are delegated and trust is developed between players and developers. Furthermore, the third aspect of the practice has been valuable for addressing the 'tools, information, stories and documents' that are common to this moderator community of practice. It is through exploring the specificity of and access to these resources that it was possible in this research to attend to the emergence and formation of different communities of practice, and the how the associated interactions were mediated and built around certain 'practices'.

The extensive definition of the domain as 'concerns, problems and passions' invites us to consider the multiple voices involved in defining and shaping a given MMOG, and the diverse channels of communication through which these efforts take place. The focus of attention is shifted from the players or the developers exclusively to the interactions amongst and between them as Jenkins (2003) and Squire and Steinkuehler (2004) emphasise. Further exploration could bring us to consider the broadband service provider, regulatory bodies and more. An expanded notion of community for instance that could also be explored through the communities of practice framework would bring into view the wider fan cultures. In discussing the pervasive mythology of *WoW*, Krzywinska seeks to demonstrate 'how the game's mythic structures and elements drive the logic that underpins World of Warcraft's stylistic milieu and provides the context for and of gameplay' (2006: 384). Krzywinska highlights the relationships that inform interpretations and contributions to the *WoW* online world, and goes on to state, 'any fantasy-based game draws on a range of pre-existing sources relevant to the invocation of the fantastic' (2006: 383) and that 'blueprint formulations', such as offered by Tolkien, are 'taken up and

extended by others' (2006: 384-85). The wider fan culture and influences such as 'fantasy blueprint formulations' could also be productively explored as contributing to the domain, configuring the community and creating practices.   Again, these are aspects beyond this paper, but their exploration could benefit from the rigorous attention to investments and interactions that the communities of practice framework encourages. The final section now considers how the framework can be constructively employed to consider the role of the researcher. This, I suggest, is where the concept may have considerable purchase for audience and reception studies research and is a noticeable strength of its adoption within this area of research.

The newbie or peripheral participate

In this final section, I offer some methodological observations on the communities of practice as a framework with a position for the researcher. The discussion of player, player-moderators and staff-moderators outlines a sort of hierarchy with delegation. More specifically, movement from being a player to a player-moderator and the associated membership of the community of practice orientated towards *Runescape*'s orderly running, are tied to behaviour and attitudes to others. With regard to the characteristic of community then, the player-moderator is a player who has been helpful and willing to share their advice, and ensures respect among players through the moderation of inappropriate language and behaviour. For the newbie, the player-moderator fulfils a particular role within the broader community of practice by shaping the world they are in. As the player-moderator has a special relationship with the developers and designers in shaping this world, the newbie and the player-moderator, as broad categories, are in relation in terms of advice and support.

Bowker and Star in their discussion of communities of practice note that 'people live, with respect to a community of practice, along a trajectory (or continuum) of membership that has elements of ambiguity and duration' and 'they move from legitimate peripheral participation to full membership' (1999: 294). This trajectory resonates with the moves players make from newbie status, to recognised and valuable player status commensurate with the role of player-moderator. This is not to say that the player-moderator is the most celebrated role within the game and other indicators of status such as experience points are extremely significant. To consider the interconnecting relations of newbies, player-moderators, developers and designers, entering the game world at one end of the trajectory as a newbie is an instructive methodological move.

The observations made above on communities of practice in *Runescape* and player-moderators, are implicitly informed by this research position through which I framed my interactions when playing the game. It may seem odd to offer an account of research methods and positions following discussion of data, but hopefully this way it is possible how my research position was located within the communities of practice framework outlined. To further draw out some of the methodological possibilities of the researcher as a newbie, the following provides a more substantial overview of my involvement.

As a new player in *Runescape*, I would inevitably be a newbie. Beyond any familiarity with playing in other MMOGs, each MMOG is distinctive in numerous ways. Even at the most basic level, being able to navigate around the world and know where things are takes time and is an endeavour helpfully served by asking. As a researcher focusing on particular dynamics in this MMOG, I equally was a newbie. Within this very broad community of practice or MMOG, I was a peripheral participant in that I did not have the familiarity or knowledge to contribute tools or advice. In terms of player-moderator and developer aspect of this community, I was also a peripheral participant. This position, however, afforded me an insight into the dynamics at work. In recognising that as a player and a researcher I had much to learn, I was able to note 'basic exchanges' and interactions with player-moderators and see the behaviour deemed appropriate leading to the forming of particular player-developer relationships.

The community of practice framework was insightful for considering the relationship between particular types of players and the design structures which work to shape and regulate this MMOG and, furthermore, for conceptualising my position as a researcher in relation to them. In an ethnographic sense, to understand this community I became part of this community. Marcus (1995: 113) suggests, 'the conventional 'how to' methodological questions of social science seem to be thoroughly embedded in or merged with the political-ethical discourse of self-identification developed by the ethnographer in multi-sited research'. My research agenda was bound up with my position as a participant, and this position allowed the interplays of this world to emerge generatively without my agenda becoming prescriptive. The two

are closely intertwined and, as Taylor (2007: 13) writes of her experiences: 'when I began my time in *EQ* I made some very basic calculations in my character creation that had a lasting impact on me both as player and, I discovered, as a researcher'. Questions of self-identification as a player and researcher are both foreground. I consciously sought to encounter players and experiences in the game afresh, beyond any previous experience in MMOGaming, as part of an exploration of how such a position opens up extant practices for scrutiny. Whilst Taylor (2007) states that she did not have in mind that she was launching a new ethnographic project and emphasises deep qualitative work over a number of years as her choice of method, I was clear about aiming to explore the nuances of player and developer interactions and roles through the position of the newbie. I could not suspend my previous experiences of game-playing sessions, nor continually re-emerge as a 'newbie', so a short-lived qualitative study was the focus.

In terms of the community of practice framework, the position of the newbie or legitimate peripheral participant is framed as a means to explore the workings, interactions and practices that configure that community whilst recognising their role within that community. There is an issue of research ethics here that Steinkuehler responds to in stating, 'my general MO to date has been to keep the lines between my professional identity and my Lineage identity transparent to whoever is interested' (2004a: online). Steinkuehler, who has drawn on the communities of practice framework to explore apprenticeship in *Lineage*, also usefully suggests that, 'through participation in a community of practice, an individual comes to understand the world (and themselves) from the perspective of that community' (2004b: online). In terms of 'communities of practice' as a framework for exploring interactions between developers and players for instance, understanding that world through ethically defined participation is vital. Questions of ethics also usefully signal the reach and limits of this research. As Schrøder (1995: 341) states on interpretative communities, 'there is a whole array of interesting questions concerning media experiences and uses that transcend […] the single interpretative community'. In this sense, this article has addressed a specific player and developer community of practice. In turn, I would stress the diversity of potential lines of inquiry and that these could extend to analysis outside the game-play environment, such the game conventions highlighted earlier.

Conclusions

In an article on MMOG player and designer practices, Steinkuehler suggests that 'by the time this short essay is circulated, the practices I have described will have evolved and changed and the descriptions I've given will no longer be accurate or complete' (2006: 211). Noting this and with regard to the broader questions this paper opened with, I will finish by emphasising the ways in which the communities of practice framework was drawn on to explore producer and consumer interactions, and for understanding the relationships, engagements and participations possible with a given media form such as a MMOG.

The communities of practice framework, in attending to the practices and resources through which a community exists and learns, offers an instructive means to investigate existing and emerging relationships within MMOGs. This can be in terms of how players learn within this world and negotiate their way in this world with other players and, as this paper has sought to show, how players and developers form communities which involve the delegation of duties and the division of operating responsibilities. A variety of participatory practices can be seen in MMOGs. Further to Jenkins' suggestion to document interactions between media producers and consumers and analyze these worlds as designed and emergent, in *Runescape* we can note that player-moderators form communities based on shared resources with the development staff towards the end of ensuring the safety and vitality of their domain - the game world. This player-moderator role may be traced within the *Runescape* community of practice as emerging out of recognition of game-play and behaviour supportive of that community.

With regard to notions of blurring between 'producers' and 'consumers', we can see that more nuanced descriptions such as delegation may provide a more sensitive account than possible through simply signalling a 'blurring'. Tracing these interactions and relationships through the communities of practice framework also was instructive for considering the location of the researcher and the formation and interplay of newbie, player-moderator and developer categories. The position of the player-moderator is a fairly unusual instance of 'blurring' boundaries between 'producers' and 'consumers', and rather than focusing on instances where consumers take on producer roles and activities in creating a short film or game level modification for instance, the player-moderator indicates the delegation of duties and the increase in responsibilities. Certain activities and commitments may be common to both developers and players, but that they are undertaken within substantially different contexts. The different colours of crowns distinguish types of moderators within

the game and, moreover, point to the embedded hierarchal relationships within that game. From this I would highlight that the role of the producer is less as an empowered creator, and would emphasise enrolment within existing structures of 'governance' (Taylor, 2006). This is not to deny the personal pleasures in the player-moderator role, but to address the specificities of certain activities, interactions and engagements. Crucially the delegation of responsibilities within player-moderator communities of practice points to interactions and relationships between 'producers' and 'consumers' that are less concerned with the celebrated aspects of user-creativity, and discourses of reversing the 'flow down pipelines to passive consumers' (Leadbetter, 2006: online).

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Notes

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[2] 'The convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development [and] real-world filmmaking techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can be either controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence' (Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, n.d.: online)

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