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Online multi-user games: Playing for real

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Abstract

The processes of playing give games their central meaning and need to be at the heart of analysis of computer games – play is what animates this medium. To focus on this I want to go beyond assessing digital games in terms of the text - structural features, aesthetic features and functionality - and examine the social and economic engagements of the players. The social engagements of online games derive from a complex interplay between the rules and affordances of a game, the user's offline context, and the online social world created with other players. In this analysis the game 'text' (the boxed product loaded onto the computer) is only one element of a much larger and more open text created by playing. Gamers create content – both through the activity of playing, and through creating 'mods', new levels, new 'skins', new modes of play, that are often appropriated and used by the development companies. Emergent industry models implemented by this form of content creation bring into question the idea that there are discrete consumers and developers. This paper interrogates the boundaries 'old' media studies invoke, of producers, audiences, and text.

Computer games are an important media to study for a number of reasons, including that they are often the area of new media that drives innovation. Markets and turnovers rival Hollywood, and the player population is a demanding one which has pushed for innovations in graphics, in connectivity protocols, and in the development of increasingly complex physics and graphics engines. These innovations, not just of technology, but of interface, functionality design, and graphics spread beyond the gaming media in a 'trickle down' effect. If we view games as a remarkably successful set of applications in the realm of new media, then understanding how they work becomes a project important for a much broader field of study.

New media and interactivity are terms that have been bandied around for the best part of a decade now, in the fields of media and communications studies. We've seen a lot of disappointing new media art – digital morphing imagery that may have been fascinating to make but for the most part lacks much appeal to look at. We've tortured our eyes reading a lot of repurposed on-screen text that is now more accessible, but essentially no different to a printed text. We've clicked our way through endless branching narratives that seemed to lack all the qualities of a good, tightly written and suspenseful story and instead caused us to meander our way to a bored standstill.

Academics have been told to put courses online, (mostly without some attendant resources to fund the activity) and often this just looks like course readers online with the occasional poorly used bulletin board. Is this all new media has to offer us? Is this what all the fuss was about? I want to argue in this paper that we need to turn our attentions to the applications in new media that really are interactive, and that really do exploit the 'newness' of the online medium. This is not about those 'writerly' applications that so fascinate their authors, but which are so difficult for their

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audiences to penetrate. This is about computer games, that draw on their audiences' (players') inputs, that require participation and give feedback and rewards, that immerse and engage and fascinate.

Computer games have been a marginalised area of study, devalued over their content, perhaps seen as crassly commercial rather than importantly successful. I want to argue that firstly, computer games are successful because they are more than repurposed 'old' media, they are structurally different texts that exploit the multi-directional feedback loops offered by the medium. More recently, with the advent of multiplayer online games, they also exploit the networking aspects of the technology. Secondly I want to argue that, because their structural difference places the player in a *configurative* role, it is no longer appropriate to use the models for analysis that have commonly been used in media and communication studies. These models are based on a linear producer/consumer trajectory, with producers, text and consumers each seen as discrete areas for analysis.

This paper traces the structural shifts in the 'text' of games and highlights the ways in which players have become increasingly a part of the 'production' of the text. I then use the multi-player online game *EverQuest* as an example to show the kinds of investments made by players in a game, and how these investments are leveraged by the developers to become part of the text, in an ongoing and recursive fashion. It will become clear from this discussion that it is impossible to treat production, text and consumption as discrete areas in a truly interactive new media application. Thus we need new models for thinking about new media. We can look to games, as successful applications which do more than repurpose old media forms, for some of the answers. It's time to create a new agenda about computer games. Annual turnover exceeds Hollywood revenues (Prensky 2001), and many people are prepared to devote significant amounts of their leisure time to playing them. The moral panic discourse of the mainstream media that would have us worrying over the antisocial and violent outcomes of games is mostly rooted in an effects based framework. It oversimplifies and paralyzes debate into an endless circular treadmill of argument about moral values. The assumption that computer games are the realm of isolated and geeky adolescent boys holed up in darkened bedrooms is outdated and inaccurate. Surveys of demographics of players (Bryce and Rutter 2002; Kline and Arlidge 2002; Taylor forthcoming) indicate that the age of players is increasing and that women account for up to half of online players. Computer games are intensely engaging and with the advent of online gaming, more and more intensely social.

Old frameworks for new media

One of the areas which has evoked debate in the field of digital games studies is centred on narrative and whether narrative is an appropriate framework to apply to the analysis of games. Are games narratives? In this debate we can read the struggle to find an approach to games that is adequate to exploring the interactive features that make games different from conventional media texts. As with any new media there is a temptation to see it in terms of an older media and to apply models of analysis that we are already comfortable with. The debate about narrative can be read as a struggle

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by some to define games as a separate and new field of study deserving of its own epistemological frames, while others argue for the interplay between media, seeking out the intertextualities and resonances of the old in the new.

Computer games, while they employ aspects of narrative, often in a somewhat instrumental way (Juul 2001; Ryan 2001), can be seen to lack the elements of narrative that make stories compelling and successful in old media – characterisation, plot, closure immanent in each element of the story. Games also bear a different relationship to time, being a present tense medium, rather than a past tense ‘retelling’ form (Cameron 1995). The elements that tend to drive a game can be identified in terms of goals, cybernetic feedback loops (Aarseth 1997), and performance. Juul notes the difference of the relationship of the player to the game as compared with the reader to the text. He suggests that because of the goal driven nature of games, the emotional engagement with the text comes, not from the engagement with characters and events such as occurs in conventional narratives, but because the player is an actant themselves. The engagement comes because the player is the performer, and the game evaluates the performance. Thus it is possible for games to be far more abstract than conventional media – there is no need for any anthropomorphic element in order for a game to succeed – one only has to look at the success of a game like *Tetris* in engaging players and holding their attention for hours on end, despite a complete lack of narrative and a lack of characters of any sort.

A similar debate to the one about narrative has taken place over visual aesthetics in new media. Work like that of Bolter and Grusin (1998) typify a particular attitude toward new media. While Bolter and Grusin make many insightful points about the relationship of visual aspects of new media to old media, their privileging of the visual and spatial over all other aspects of media, for instance over sound and over the concept of agency, makes their analysis limited. Their eagerness to prove that there is nothing new in new media other than a reworking of old concepts, denies the ‘readers’ configurative role and the impact of social and other networks instantiated by new media infrastructure and practices. Their genealogy is useful in pointing to the continuing practices of visual media concepts, but is perhaps inadequate to the task of describing and analysing the dynamic nature of a computer game as a whole. My point in drawing out these various elements of debate from the literature is to demonstrate that a purely textual analysis approach using traditional frameworks offered by older analytic styles, which considers the aesthetics and the affordances offered by a game ‘text’ (meaning the ‘boxed product’ released by a game developer) misses some of the key aspects of computer games that make them games. These are the aspects of play and interaction that animate the text and make it different every time it is played. It’s true some games are structured ‘on a rail’, where progression is strictly determined by a set of parameters and rules which allow very little latitude for player creativity. However the trend is towards games with much more open or emergent structures, where player direction is more loosely determined by the affordances in the game, and where the creativity of the player leads to new and unpredictable outcomes each time the game is played (Juul 2002). The online multiuser

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games are exemplars of this.

Online multi-user games

The online multi-user game typifies a new kind of involvement of the player in the configuration of the text. Player 'investments' in the game occur at a number of different levels, and cannot be treated as peripheral. They are, instead, integral and essential to the success of the game. The most successful and popular uses of new media are those which exploit either or both of two factors. Firstly the connectivity and networking aspects afforded by the infrastructure of the internet and secondly the feedback and cybernetic loop opportunities afforded by the technology. Internet chat and computer games are exemplars of this. They are both applications which go beyond the delivery of traditional 'closed' texts made by producers for consumption by audiences who cannot influence the outcomes of the story. They can each involve the user in a dynamic and active way. Internet chat exploits the technical network to create new social networks and the feedback from both machine and other people is constant, engaging and immersive. Computer games are 'ergodic' (a concept employed by Aarseth (1997) which describes the process whereby the 'text' cannot advance without meaningful input by the 'reader'). They employ feedback loops that keep the player engaged in an equally dynamic and immersive fashion. The online multi-user game combines both the social aspects of chat rooms and the intense ergodic engagements of single player games into a hybrid application.

For the purposes of this paper I will use the example of *EverQuest* to elucidate what some of the player investments into a game are, but it should be noted that other games, other genres of multi-user online games, made by different developers or publishers, instantiate different investments and use different models of development. *EverQuest* is a multi user online role playing game, with over 400,000 players (Yee 2001) who pay a monthly subscription fee to be able to access the servers that run the game. *EverQuest* is played in a three dimensional persistent world called Norrath. Players can have up to eight characters on a server, and the characters can be drawn from about a dozen races and can be one of a dozen or so professions. When a player logs into the game she or he interacts with both computer generated characters and characters that are controlled by other players. Thus much of the action takes place by playing with other people also logged into the world at the same time. Progress through the game is made by gaining 'experience' (mostly through killing ever more difficult monsters), developing various skills (like baking, or blacksmithing, or brewing), and accumulating wealth in the form of money and weapons and armour of various degrees of sophistication. The game is full of quests which a player can go on to get armour and various magic items as well. Its aesthetic is typically mediaeval fantasy, with a large debt to Tolkien. In these aspects it is like other online role playing games. Its rule structure makes it difficult to 'solo' the game – progress is generally faster and the game more entertaining when grouped with other players. There is no 'end' to *EverQuest* and some players have been playing for years now. The following description of some of the ways players invest in the game is meant to highlight the 'emergent' structure of the game – the ways it is animated by player contributions, which vary depending on the player. But it should also become clear

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that the game depends not only on the player to animate it, but that the players depend on each other for significant amounts of the game-play. Thus, the developer also relies on the players interacting with each other, creating communities in order to play. This is part of what drives their subscription base. The affordances of the game structure facilitate and encourage this social interaction. The developers add new features to the game, based on player feedback, to extend game-play. From this process it can be seen that 'production' continues well after the release of the game onto the market, and that it is contributed to in a number of ways by players – by playing and interacting socially, and by giving feedback for further development.

The investments players make in this game range over a number of areas. In *EverQuest* investment begins with money (the set up CD and the ongoing subscription fees). But in some ways this is the least of it. *EverQuest* uses the usual strategies to get a player engaged – lots of feedback, plenty of rewards, challenges that grow in size as the skill of the player increases and so on. It does not have the fast-paced action of a First Person Shooter (FPS) game like *Quake* or a speed and adrenalin experience like in a racing sim, but it has its system of feedback and challenges and rewards. It is fun, and it is also intensely time consuming.

As a player you create a character of a particular race and class (profession) and set off into the world of Norrath in a tattered tunic and bare feet. You have a basic weapon and you run around a zone hitting things with it. You whack a rat, it bites you back, you whack it, it bites, eventually either you or it dies. You do this a few times over and you get little messages – You just got better at one-handed slashing [2], you just got better at defence [4]. You have a wide variety of skills like this that keep building throughout the game (it's a big moment when you build your first skill to 100 and become a 'master'). Some skills automatically build as you engage in play, some you have to build deliberately (trade skills). Every now and then you advance so much you move to the next level, gaining access to more power, more spells, more health. You learn to loot the corpses of the things you kill and sell the loot to merchants or other players. You buy food and water, armour and spells, weapons and trade items. The game is training you along the way. Teaching you this tactic not that tactic. As a player you exercise many choices while you play. There are very few of the 'progressive' 'on-a-rail' prescriptions for play that are found in some games.

What the online multi-user game does is also structure in features that reward social behaviour. It is beneficial in *EverQuest* to group with other players. There are mechanisms which encourage and facilitate this in the interface. Grouping allows players to kill higher level monsters and gain experience more quickly. Grouping is, of course, an essentially social action and requires some social skill in terms of knowing how to collaborate. Dysfunctional groups die a lot. Groups that know how to divide tasks along profession lines, assign roles to different characters: pulling the monsters in to fight; being the main 'tank' or person who the monsters focus their attacks on; being the healer who casts healing spells on ailing members of the group; being the caster of damaging spells on the monsters, and so on. At higher levels,

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groups group together in raids – massive attacks on high level monsters. Some of these raids can take 12 hours and involve over 40 people. Raids involve hierarchies of control, also facilitated by in-game mechanisms in the interface. Groups have leaders, raids have leaders of groups who communicate in hierarchies of command, coordinating the activities of the various groups.

Players also form guilds – which are a more sustained structure. Groups form and disband in random and short-term ways. Guilds form and evolve over longer periods of time. Different guilds have different goals. Some aim to fight together, some aim to help each other out on different quests, some swap equipment, give help to lower level members, have people who can be called upon to help find and raise your corpse if you died somewhere difficult, and so on.

A further aspect of player investment can be found in the numerous websites about the game. These are created by players and are not merely peripheral to the game, but can be essential guides. When I was a new player in this game I spent four days looking for a particular zone which was part of a quest. The game information provided by the developers did not contain maps of how zones connected to each other, and the world of Norrath has many, many zones. It was only after I found North Freeport, having run my feet to stumps for the preceding four days, that another player told me about the player created websites with detailed maps of all the zones and their connections. After that I discovered websites with guides on how to play particular classes in the game, how to develop the various skills like baking and fletching, what all the quests are and how to do them and so on. This information is almost essential to playing the game.

Another aspect of player investment which is perhaps less tangible, but which I believe nonetheless is essential to the playability of the game, (and therefore its profitability) is the regulation and surveillance of each others' behaviour. Players police each others' behaviour, as in any community. They establish norms, which are adhered to across the game. Transgressors are ejected from groups, their names and transgressions may be shouted across a whole zone to humiliate them or to warn other players about them. More subtle forms of governmentality exist as well, with gender norms policed by players through various mechanisms common to many communities (on or off line). It is possible to resort to complaining to a GM (Game Master) about a player's behaviour, but from my observation, much of the policing is done by the players themselves. This is no incidental or marginal practice. The developer and publisher rely on the community regulating and behaving in ways which make people find it an environment they wish to be in.

My point in detailing these structures is to show how the game-play has become integrated with social structures in the game. The kinds of values instantiated by the game rules, and the processes of governmentality embodied in the game are complex. Communities form, friendships develop, complex social structures take shape with histories and rivalries and interconnections. Players invest huge amounts of time in the game – some surveys (Yee 2001; Kline and Arlidge 2002) have shown an *average*

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of 21 hours a week. The time commitment is translated into social investments and emotional commitments. These vary in intensity, as you would expect in any population that numbers nearly half a million. The commitments range from those who become devoted to their guild and go on raids four nights a week for four or five hours at a time to those who become intensely romantically involved, to those who never join a guild and only randomly connect with other players occasionally. This last group is less prevalent. It's a hard game to play without grouping.

It is the social relationships that sustain the game over time. Friendships formed with other players make it worthwhile coming back. This is a key point for the developers, who run the game as a subscription based service. People pay around US\$12 a month to subscribe to the game in order to access it. The developers want to extend the game-play as far as possible to keep the subscriptions coming in.

Players and developers

It is to the relationship between the developers and the players I want to turn now. In this section I intend to broaden my discussion to include other game developers and publishers, as the model used by the *EverQuest* developers and publisher is not the only one being used. I have shown how structurally the text is not complete or static, but requires the engagement of the players at a configurative level. The players organise themselves into groups, decide their own trajectories through the gameworld, focus on 'levelling up' or alternatively on role-playing or skills development.

The latitude within the game for the player to determine the action is very wide. So the text can be seen as emergent in that sense. But the developer's role is not finished with the release of the feature set the player buys initially on CD.

JC Herz notes that

In a virtual environment as complex as a massively multi-player online world, whose success depends entirely on player interaction, developers recognize the player base as a strategic asset. (Herz 2002, p. 87)

She goes on to state that:

The game belongs to the players, as much as the developers. So it is in the developers' interest to keep players in the loop, as the game takes shape, and to leverage their experience. This is not a marketing ploy..., although it does generate good will. It is part of the core design process. (Herz 2002, p. 87)

The general trend is to regard the social relationships and networks engendered by an online game as core to its success rather than peripheral. Herz points to the developer Blizzard's strategy of maintaining a free server system for players to play their game (Battle.net) – there are no subscription fees to this network, but the creation of the network is seen as core.

The 'soft stuff' is not discussed as non-profitable. ... Blizzard's products are videogames. But the social dynamics of a networked player population are the backbone of its business. (Herz 2002 p. 95)

She also notes that the social bonds and connections keep players playing long after they have mastered the game-play. Thus the life of a game can be extended by nurturing the social networks engendered by the game.

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Pearce observes that:

...participation is part of the production processes. Companies like EverQuest now view themselves in a service role. Therefore, they view the ongoing creative and gameplay maintenance as a critical part of their business. ...To keep the game fresh and exciting and to encourage repeat play, the game is adapted as it is played in direct response to player actions. ... game designers must engage in an ongoing dialogue with players in order to constantly raise the bar on excitement and challenge. (Pearce 2002, p. 26)

In many games, players go on to create their own content after the release, often using development tools released by the game developer. Thus, according to Herz, 90% of the *Sims* content is player created. Pearce points to *Counterstrike*, a game created entirely by players using the level builders in the *Half-life* game engine. *Counterstrike* has gone on to be immensely successful as an online multi-player game, winning awards from the industry and players.

The response of different companies to the emergence of player created content has differed and suggests a number of different models are in use. Some actively encourage player creations through the release of tools for players to make their own levels and 'skins'. Some provide websites for the trading of such content between players. Others ban the trading of in-game assets and sue those found trading game material over the net.

Thus while the *Sims* content is created largely by players, and games like *Diablo* have had a feature called 'D-Bay' implemented to allow player trading of material, trading of *EverQuest* items has been banned by Sony/Verant (the publishers and developers). The observations of the above authors about the increasingly active role of the player in the design of games are made in a way which glosses over the area of IP and the economic relationship these processes imply. Banks, raises, but does not deal with, the question:

... is it simply 'business as usual', with the activities of consumers being increasingly seduced and incorporated within the networks of corporate capital? (Banks 2002, p. 212)

Taylor (2002) suggests that

The move to commercialized virtual environments is presenting some unique challenges to the negotiations users are making between their private lives and corporate interests. ... spaces and experience come to be mediated primarily through commercialized systems of authorship and exchange. (Taylor 2002, p. 228)

Thus she points to "... the thornier problems that arise when culture, communities and commerce intersect" (Taylor 2002, p. 228). Thus the new models of production raise the broader issues of the commodification of culture and the commercialisation of symbolic space.

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In particular Taylor looks at the case of *EverQuest*, where a player economy in the trade of both items and characters developed ex-game. Unlike some other games, player created content is not a feature of the *EverQuest* environment. However part of the game-play involves both building a character over time and acquiring in-game money and items such as weapons and armour. Players began to buy and sell in-game equipment, money and characters at auction sites like Ebay on the internet for real money. However Sony Online Entertainment (SOE), the publisher of *EverQuest*, and Verant, the developer, banned the sale of items and characters in ex-game transactions. Players selling these items argue that they put the time and labour into acquiring items and developing characters and therefore they should have the right to sell them. SOE/Verant specifically ban such transactions in their End User Licence Agreement (EULA).

Games are spaces engaged in on a voluntary basis. This is one of the dictums of play identified by Huizinga in his study of play from the 1930s, which holds true of play in every context. No-one is forcing people to play games like *EverQuest*, or to accede to the EULA – a contractual relationship that is entered into every time a player logs into a game, which imposes legal restraints and obligations upon them. However, as Taylor points out:

... we increasingly live in a world in which opting out of technological systems is becoming more and more difficult... and yet participation within them pushes us to accept structures we might oppose. (Taylor 2002, p. 233)

Not all corporations take the line that Sony Online Entertainment takes, and some interesting models are emerging which attempt to deal with IP rights of players. In a paper delivered to the WIP conference (UQ) in October 2002, Banks outlined a model under consideration by Auran (a Brisbane Games Developer) which involved a website which facilitated player content trading. The rights management of the IP in such a developer run site is complex. Issues of who owned or had the rights to what content after it had been traded and incorporated into the game were difficult, but Auran was attempting to implement a system whereby creators might conceivably have their IP recognised and garner some economic benefit from their work. From the foregoing discussion it can be seen that players contribute to game development and text creation in a number of ways. I would argue that all player creativity and investment, be it social or material, needs to be considered in any model of what a game 'text' is. The developers are reliant on player interaction and social activity for the success of their games. Thus the key elements that represent a shift from a producer/consumer model of analysis include firstly, that the text itself is 'emergent' rather than closed, and therefore the player animates and creates significant parts of the text through their own investments and decisions. Secondly that development does not finish at the point of publication, but is an ongoing process which involves both players and developers. It is possible to see the game developer in a service delivery role here, as they seek to facilitate and maintain community relations in the game. Thirdly, that the 'intangible' social investments of players are integral to the game, and have a place in the 'value chain' of game development,

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which in turn implies the intersection of social and economic relations in this environment.

The challenges for the broader field of new media are to shift away from producing 'finished' texts; to structure into the text itself elements of feedback, goals, rewards, and user participation that actually has an effect on the outcomes of the text; to understand how important networks are, both technical and social, and exploit them as a feature; and to plan for ongoing development and support of the text. Most of these elements are classically underrated by new media content developers. The tedium of much of what passes for new media is the unfortunate result. But as has been demonstrated in this discussion, the creation of successful new media may require a substantial shift in the way we think about production.

Such a shift requires a concomitant shift in analytic strategies. Textual analysis which seeks to analyse the feature set of a game is just not enough. Studies of players which focus only on the psychosocial or socio/cultural elements of playing may miss the productive and economic relationships involved in being a co-creator of the text, and studying production values and processes of developers and publishers without considering player communities will only give a small part of the picture. Truly ergodic texts require us to develop ways of thinking about media that go beyond the linear consumer/producer model.

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