Access All Areas?
The Evolution of SingStar from the PS2 to PS3 Platform

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Abstract
Despite many challenges to technological determinism it is fair to say that technological
development is often still presented to, and by, those in organisations and society as
inevitably good. The internet is positioned as affording access to a range of information and
services that can qualitatively improve our every day lives. Whilst this clearly can be
acknowledged as the case, we also know that the internet can raise difficulties and even
disadvantages. Understanding this interconnected complex domain of sociotechnical
experience precludes broad generalizations and requires recognition of the nuances that
surround specific sets of sociotechnical assemblages. By drawing upon Dutton’s (2005)
reconfiguration of access arguments we investigate the use of digital games within
recreational environments. The ideas in this paper are based upon two intersecting
ethnographies and a qualitative non-participant field study of the console based game,
SingStar. Through this approach we demonstrate that the sociotechnical choices associated
with different versions of the game have constructed a reconfiguration of access to
SingStar that critiques the automatic association of new versions of technology with improvement and
examines the ways in which non-use and, in effect, non-access could similarly alter and even extend a game play experience. More broadly, studying the evolution of what was, in effect, a ‘stand alone’ digital game to a network enabled version demonstrates how a move to
becoming an internet based platform may restrict rather than enable access. Utilising an
entertainment oriented activity and technology to examine the issues that underlie Dutton’s
rubric of ‘access’ also permits intersecting consideration of the respective roles that
developer, user, non-user and technology have in the mediation of social experience.

Keywords: Access, Internet Technology, Games, Gaming.
1 Technology Changes Everything?

“The premise of Sing Star is simple – it is a karaoke-inspired title which awards points to players who can sing in tune... I can only hope that Sony release another disc of songs to increase the longevity of the title”. Darren Waters, BBC News Online Staff, 28 May 2004.

It has become a clichéd observation of popular media that technology is forever changing. This comment suggests a social necessity to ‘keep up’ and the implied threat that an inability to use information and communications technology (ICT) equates with an inability to engage with society – to be social. But behind this cliché is the even more politically charged and significant recognition for the manner in which ICTs have a continuous and reciprocal engagement with social and cultural conditions. The privilege that ICTs hold both in relation to other technologies as well as within social and cultural arrangements, is built around a series of key mythic discourses (Wynne, 1988; Noir and Walsham, 2007) including the continuous improvement revealed in each new version, the primary role of the developer or designer and the importance of being able to personally access voluminous information – irrespective of how uncritical it is, its lack of veracity or the undifferentiated manner in which it is presented. These myths are important for the way that they act as an ‘active form of social organization’ (Williams 1983, 211).

Dutton (2005) synthesizes a number of his previous arguments to negotiate the complexity of these relationships and to overcome the simplicity and predictability of ‘conventional’ approaches that construct and assume systematic logical relationships between access to the Internet and its use. Dutton’s view of reconfiguring access constitutes a less precise and more fluid worldview that recognizes the political significance of access and the influence of technological resources alongside a range of other parameters that eschews the assumption of inherent power existing in information. Dutton’s work is also useful in its recognition of the role and influence of non-use and non-users within discussions of ICTs. This is significant as it empowers what is already a problematic classificatory grouping that generally remains unvoiced within discussions of the Internet, and arguably technology more generally (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005; Wyatt 2005). The non-user is the critical political resistance – although perhaps lacking theorisation in its expression - to the dominant discourses surrounding ICTs (Selwyn 2003). Non-use does not require complete rejection of ICT or Internet technologies but rather can be expressed as individual and isolated acts of selection which represents choice based around a range of factors and resources.

Dutton describes the varying rationales that underlie different users and non-users choice as forming an ecology of games which accommodates and understands a range of political trajectories intersecting at a given point of access. This model offers explanation of the ways in which apparently similar acts of non-use and use develop for different and even contradictory reasons. Our application of Dutton’s discussion to a console-based game is not a naïve interpretation of this aspect of Dutton’s discussion but rather examines a realm of ICT that exemplifies the argument by being highly visible and engaging, offering a seemingly obvious interface and through its attenuation of the experiences that games encourage. We take Dutton’s discussion and utilise it to understand the phenomena of SingStar and more specifically the consequences of the development of the game from the PS2 to the PS3 with its attendant integration with Internet technologies.

2 Gaming and Reconfiguring Access

Examination of games as a focus for research brings together a rich literature (e.g. Decheneaut & Moore, 2004; Cheok et al 2006; Smith, 2006) that introduces a relatively large (although admittedly historically short) body of examples regarding change and reconfigured
access. Some key moments of change have included shifts from console to GUI-based games, extrapolation to a 2.5D perspective (Stahl, 2002) and from single to multi-user experiences. These changes are most noticeably found in the most long-lived and popular of the titles. For example, the move from ‘top down’ to 2.5D perspective in Sierra’s King’s Quest titles was initially met with resistance and calls for the developers to roll back to the former display style (Moberly, 2008). Some developments are much more conservative but equally controversial for the game’s regular players. NetHack’s (ironically misnamed as the game is not multiplayer or network enabled) use of colour and sprite-like characters was similarly criticised as a radical step that rejected the game’s ASCII character monochrome graphics.

Moreover, the continuous development cycles of games and gaming platforms has seen the reconfiguring of access via the ready capacity to seamlessly link game and online play with the surrounding environment. The primary motivation for this integration of experiences is to achieve a level of realism that is impossible through a screen-based experience (that utilises non-player character artificial intelligence) alone. The perhaps unintended secondary result of integrating experiences from a mixture of realities is an improved potential for wider social engagements offering a counter-response to the arguments that console games and gaming in general are solitary pursuits. As has been stated elsewhere, gamers can be incredibly social, seeing collaboration and socialisation as an integral part of game play and success as a player (Kolo and Baur 2004; Chen 2005; Smith 2006; Taylor 2006). Games display ‘intertextuality’ and incorporate ‘transliteracy’ skills (Thomas, 2007) and we must see them located within wider social and cultural patterns (Yates and Littleton 1999; Crawford 2006). Indeed, for example, it has been shown that attendance at LAN parties can sometimes be predominantly associated with socialisation beyond the screen (Jansz and Martens 2005). Another key method of integrating out-of-game and in-game actions is through the utilisation of existing digital networks. Recent releases of all major console platforms (including their handheld variants) enable players to engage, through the game experience, with other players. The major shift in focus with the new console platforms is to enable chat and less formal information and communication practices that exist outside the defined game play – beyond the screen and the direct control of developers. However, very little academic attention has been devoted to this specific area of gaming and its wider social and cultural implications (Crawford 2006; Crawford and Rutter 2007). Console developers, recognising this need to combine experiences and realities, have introduced everyday items into games as specialised controllers such as drums, bongos, skateboards, golf clubs, pool cues, a puzzle ball, fishing rods, buzzers, steering wheels, guitars or, in the case of the Rockband, a guitar, bass, drums and microphone offered a complete set of instruments. These props offer a generally familiar interface for a game that employs a genre of everyday activity in which the object would normally be found. In other words golf games are not generally controlled by a guitar or a steering wheel and where these types of specialised controllers can crossover into other game genres, such as controlling driving games with a dance mat (or vice versa), the interface can appear awkward and counter-intuitive¹. As a consequence and with very few exceptions, the buzzers of the Sony Buzz series being one rare example, the possible use for these controllers is relatively restricted and the games that utilise them appear to offer little opportunity for variations beyond those already introduced and designed by the designers and developers.

A further variation on the integration of everyday and digital console technology is found with the Nintendo Wii which uses sensory feedback technologies to enable players to directly manipulate any variant of ‘virtual’ equipment in-game. The implication of this newer technology is that the physical generic controllers can be continuously repurposed through the game software to suit the needs of any individual game. Nintendo eases the conceptual difficulty of a generic object by enabling physical skins to wraparound the generic object that more readily conform to the ‘expected’ object of control and interface. For example, one can purchase plastic replicas of Tennis Rackets to attach as shown in Figure 1. The information

¹ We do however note Hindman’s (2006) work which reports on the ‘Sonictroller’ – a system that allows existing video games to be controlled by musical instruments, such as acoustic guitars.
regarding a player’s engagement with the game is continuously sent out from the controllers and this enables the object to be constantly monitored and for other objects that understand the information received to respond appropriately. The opportunity for intercepting the information from Wii controllers with other third party ‘interpreting’ objects and altering the in-game response of the original game is an as-yet unexplored possibility although it is clearly an imminent possibility. Despite the in-game flexibility of controlling ‘virtual’ objects this configuration offers still less room for re-appropriation and re-use of the objects by players in different ways (or even different games) as the object – or rather the object that the Wii-mote is imitating - only exists as an appendage to the game itself.

These arrangements between controller and gamer present an unusual situation as these objects have seemingly few opportunities for subsequent re-appropriation in game where any unexpected or additional usage could be applied in the way that the social shaping school would expect (Bijker, Hughes et al. 1987; Bijker and Law 1994). Thus, one might expect such games to play out as the designers intended given that access to the gaming experience appears restricted by a lack of the potential for interpretive flexibility and introfusion (Fleck 1994). This concern regarding the use and appropriation of games and their technologies are exemplified in the SingStar series of games available for Sony’s PlayStation2 (PS2) and PlayStation3 (PS3) consoles.

3 Researching Games

Our study is based upon two intersecting ethnographies of SingStar gaming experiences and a qualitative field study. Two of the authors, Fletcher and Light have separately recorded ethnographies of SingStar game-playing groups since March 2006. Ferneley began a third strand of non-participatory observational fieldwork in December 2007 when the PS3 version of the game was released. There have been several occasions in which Fletcher and Light have participated in SingStar gaming sessions at the same event. In total they have interacted with over 100 game players (it is difficult to be precise as players come and go at gaming sessions where other activities in different rooms might be taking place too, e.g. chatting in the kitchen at a party or younger people having to leave because of parentally imposed evening curfews). In at least one case, however, the classification as ‘player’ became thoroughly problematised with a participant at a social event choosing to ‘sing’ but completely disengaging themselves from playing. At a less extreme level many of the people involved in our studies also cross the boundary between player and non-player when they

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2 http://www.hackaday.com/2006/12/01/hacking-wiimote-bluetooth

3 Although we are keen to point out reappropriation does happen. An excellent example of this can be found in the shape of Johnny Chung Lee’s Wiimote project. As part of this he has reconfigured a Wiimote, a controller for the Nintendo Wii gaming console, to facilitate electronic whiteboard functionality via a standard personal computer. See: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~johnny/projects/wii/
were ‘forced’ to sing a rap song on the PS2 or PS3 versions of the game. Our gaming groups are demographically diverse in nature. They have included people from the ages 5 to their early 60s, boys/men and girls/women, and people from a wide range of countries including Australia, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, India, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Spain as well as the United Kingdom. These players have also held a wide variety of their relationships with one another – partners, colleagues, family members, friends, friends of friends and even people who had never met before (on one occasion one of the authors was at a Karaoke night in a bar and several people at that event were invited back to join in a game of SingStar).

Data was collected through our observation of, and participation in, gaming events and within online groups dedicated to the game. With respect to the latter, we joined the SingStar appreciation society on Facebook and sought out and watched many of the public YouTube recordings related to the game. Data was recorded via note-taking at events, informal and semi-structured interviewing of participants and the creation of photographic and video evidence. Our data collection and analysis was guided by a general desire to understand how SingStar is made to work in situ as a cultural and social experience. We met regularly to discuss our findings in order to feed these in to each other’s future participation and observation efforts. Many individual observations were subsequently confirmed independently.

4 Accessing the Game - SingStar

SingStar is a karaoke style game that runs on the Sony PS2 platform as a ‘standalone’ game and, since December 2007, is available as a product for the PS3 platform with additional functionality delivered via the Internet. SingStar adds a range of features not found in karaoke that for many create the game’s appeal including scoring based on the proximity of the player’s singing with the original pitch, high score tables and team components. A less readily acknowledged aspect of the SingStar disks are the use of 20 or 30 original artists’ recordings that distinguishes the game from karaoke and other broadly comparable console games. Figure 2 is a screen shot from the PS3 game which in particular shows the graphical method of recording performance, lyric prompts, current score and of course the video of the song playing in the background. There are currently 14 disks for the PS2 and 2 disks (plus several hundred online downloads) for the PS3 UK-orientated collection with a range of country variations available for many releases. Country-specific oriented releases are identified by varying track listings that accommodate more localised ‘hits’ and occasionally variations in the title. In this paper, we focus upon the UK.
In the following sections we consider how the ‘upgrade’ to the PS3 version of SingStar reconfigures access to the game play experience in terms of the interaction possibilities of the players, services provided to play the game, the information provided to play the game and the manner in which technologies mediate this process. Of course these themes interrelate and, indeed, arguably the theme of interaction possibilities of the players weaves through the others intensively.

4.1 Players and Services

Dutton positions the notion of access to services and the associated financial models as a key resource. In the PS2 version of the game new songs could (and at least currently can still) be added by purchasing additional discs (at < £UK20 per disk of between 20 to 30 songs) that can then be easily transported to gaming events (provided a PS2 machine is available), swapped and borrowed between friends and family and ‘sold on’ through the second-hand market for PS2 games disks. With the PS3 version of the game additional songs are purchased individually via the Internet (at £UK0.99 per song) and downloaded, and locked, to the specific PS3 machine’s internal hard drive. The physical transportation of a song has thus become more difficult requiring that an entire machine must be moved or complex and lengthy account changes having to be made. This has become no easy task – the PS2 slimline console is 28x2.8x15.2cm and weighs 900g, a 60GB PS3 console is 32.5x9.8x27.4 and weighs 4.99 kg.

SingStar uses the original artist music and video tracks and thus some of these restrictions could be claimed to offer a more formal mechanism to protect intellectual property rights. However, this is an overly simplistic view of digital rights management which presumes that only one single licensing model is possible for the provided media content. More importantly, Sony’s position as a multinational entertainment company also means that many, but not all, of the artists are signed through one or other of the company’s record label subsidiaries. Arguably the change in distribution model between the PS2 and PS3 versions of SingStar respectively equate to the widely adopted CD and currently prevalent online systems for selling music. The clear change in the way users gain access to the game and its songs is one aspect of this resource.

The PS2 gaming environment – and its unforeseen but inherent limitations brought about because of the long development times required for new versions of console platforms - also saw the development of informal support services outside the control and maintenance of Sony that included the global dissemination of videos of SingStar sessions, and discussion forums. The PS3, in contrast, embedded these services in a more formal manner through the game interface itself and, whilst at the time of writing this has not occurred, the structuring of these type of services is such that a financial model could easily be imposed at any stage in the future and possibly transparently through a system or game update that Sony regularly imposes upon the users of the game4.

Perhaps curiously in the context of game studies and in terms of the type of support that was provided through third party Web sites, SingStar is unique among console games in that it configures access to the game play experience in such a way that it has no known cheats or shortcuts to achieving a high score. The only advice that has ever been posted in forums in this context is to get the original singer to sing the song. A number of the participants in our study who were aware of this advice observed that a number of artists would now not be capable of repeating their performance of 20 or 30 years previously. Indeed, given the amount of technological tweaking of many of today’s performer’s vocal performances we suggest that it is debatable whether many popular contemporary artists could score the maximum of 10,000! We have found that this has produced unintended and unusual consequence that

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4 Unless there is a hack we are not aware of, it is difficult to continue playing SingStar if an update has been released. You are locked out of the online element until the update has been performed.
SingStar has tended to serve players by focussing them on the aesthetic qualities of in game performance and the high scores achieved rather than using easy means to gain the same result.

4.2 Players and Information

We now turn to SingStar’s reconfiguration potentials as related to information and how access can affect what we read, hear, see or know. This is exemplified in the change from the PS2’s use of disks to the direct downloading of songs to the PS3. Initially, this may be regarded as a positive improvement and a tighter integration with the game’s improved environment. Yet, the PS2 disks were also the original primary information dissemination mechanism in game play sessions. For example, a disk sleeve could be photocopied and then distributed at parties allowing everyone to independently choose songs. We have all personally witnessed this usage at larger, more formally organised events where a wide mix of novice and experienced players gathered. The photocopied list of the available songs from each disk was handed around the audience/players as a form of menu enabling pre-selection and planning for the progress of the party. This approach to song selection and the order in which members of the audience become players echoes the approach employed in a key reference technology for SingStar – karaoke as it is conventionally played in bars and clubs. The PS3 game replaces this mechanism with a screen based iTunes-like SingStore interface (Figure 3), clustering songs by genres preset and defined by the game. Beyond the small selection of songs on volumes 1 and 2 of the PS3 game, song information is now officially only accessible in-game and the presentation by genre encourages a form of ‘narrowcasting’ defined by Sony through the developers.

Figure 3: Browsing All Songs in the SingStore

In our work regarding the PS2 version of the game whilst many of the people who we spoke to, and played with, expressed specific preferences for particular songs that fell within a common genre very few hesitated to sing songs outside of these favourite genres. This preparedness for participation and the open-minded attitudes that the game generally generates also reveals that players who had previously resisted some of the songs offered by the game disks are prepared to sing them in a game context. This is significant as it makes regular players familiar with the timing and complete lyrics of songs that they might otherwise reject or prefer not to listen to. While the game developers do not explicitly state that they are aiming for any form of social change, many of the currently available PS2 disks
while broadly categorised by a genre or period, i.e. 80s, 90s, R&B or Rock, offer a range of songs that fall into distinct style that would not have originally been played on a single radio or television station. As an example, the recently released R&B disk offers songs regularly played on the BBC’s Radio1 such as Mark Ronson and Amy Winehouse as well as songs from Diana Ross, Womack and Womack and Salt ‘n Pepa revealing the broad social space that any given music genre can occupy. The preparedness to initially participate in the singing of ‘any’ song – sometimes reinforced with a house defined ‘no spin’ rule, i.e. the singing of whichever song the game randomly first offers up (and not being allowed to spin the carousel again) - backed up with encouragement for repeated performances almost unexpectedly constructs a type of music appreciation not normally experienced outside formal primary or secondary education systems. Encouraging the memorisation and recitation of a song also produces a personal satisfaction that can potentially overcome any particular musical preference or bias. Access to the SingStore in the PS3 version somewhat restricts this possibility as regular players generally download only what they know and like (Figure 4). The former ‘rich’ experience is generally now only available to regular players when they play at a new venue – i.e. a new PS3 with SingStar due to the lack of song transportability and varying downloaded music selections.

Figure 4: SingStore Categories

Genre based classification further presents difficulties as a mechanism for offering choice as it assumes that players have a generally broad, almost theoretical understanding of music and that the classificatory schema of the person who classified the song will generally match the understanding of the person ‘reading’ the scheme. Musical genre is difficult when songs cross genres or where the technology of SingStar has determined where a song is classified. This latter example is particularly brought out by one of the more recent additions to the PS3 suite of downloadable songs in the form of the Ting Tings’, “That’s not my name”, which was well received on popular charts and is ultimately – if classification is possible at all - a pop song. However, it is presented as ‘Rap’ (an often unpopular genre for regular SingStar players) meaning that it invokes a scoring system which differs from the majority of songs and as a result is classified in this way on the SingStore – the result is that the song is frustrating for players familiar with it, as they expect it to be ‘sang’ not ‘rapped’ and unfamiliar for those who prefer rapping.

Song choice during a game utilises a carousel that references a physical record jukebox (but an archaic and unfamiliar references for younger players) but now ordered alphabetically. As a PS3 system has an additional songs added to it through download, the only complete list of
songs exists in the context of the system – locked within the system of SingStar itself and with no readily apparent means to export even a text based list. This seemingly trivial change in where the game’s key information is stored and can be accessed influences how the game can be played in certain situations. In large group and party environments, song selection for the PS3 tends to come after a singer or singers have volunteered or been nominated. Because there is no easy alternative list of tracks to browse in the run up to their turn, they have to make a selection when someone is not singing. This means there are times in a game play session when there are gaps in play. This type of delay differs from the PS2 situation in which the order of singers can be determined by which song they chose and on which disk the song is available. Informal playlists of songs can be created to minimise disk changes and tracks can be chosen whilst other people sing as there is access to a catalogue via the PS2’s disk cases. While hard disk technology may speed up actual loading times and the technical ability to provide on-demand choice this offers little in the way of an advantage in situations involving human decision and selection – and even more so when alcohol is an additional contributing technology to the situation.

Figure 5: The SingStar Selection Carousel

4.3 Players and Technologies

Another resource within Dutton’s access paradigm are technologies and how they are shaped. The PS2 to PS3 ‘upgrade’ reveals the control exerted over the tool in the new version of the game. As might be expected with a move to a more readily Internet enabled platform the game’s latest PS3 version attempts to increase virtual interactivity with a closed community being established through the game space itself. Sony, through the game developer London Studios, has, with the PS3 version, endeavoured to confine access to the broader game community through its own console platform and in doing so has attempted to reconfigure access options. Indeed, a simplistic statement would be that the designers have sought to set far-wider and more expansive parameters for game play, as alluded to below,

"I don’t think you can ever really know exactly how things are going to come together, until you finish. Yes, you can have early prototypes and slices of gameplay, but when all the work finally comes together and works like it’s supposed to and it’s actually better and more fun than you expected – that is excellent! Paulina Bozek, Singstar Game Director speaking about the completion of the PS3 version"3

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Yet the earlier PS2 – and still readily available - version of the game produced thriving Facebook, YouTube and MySpace communities and was the inspiration for this shift in development trajectory:

*The idea for My SingStar Online came along very early in the development of SingStar. We were spending some time researching how people were playing our game and we kept finding photos and videos of people's SingStar parties. People were using sites like Flickr and YouTube to share their experiences. We thought this was great and we wanted to capitalize on this and give users the chance to share their performances from within the game. Obviously, with Flickr and YouTube, you're relying on someone having a digital camera, access to a PC and the technical knowledge to be able to upload their content. We wanted to enable the user to share their experiences and then continue playing the game in as seamless a way as possible - and so the idea for My SingStar Online was born. Kevin Mason, Lead Designer – Singstar*[^6]

Thus, although the games designers think their ‘job is done’ at the end of official development, they also acknowledge, and benefit from the innofusion practices that users undertake post production.

Both console versions enable game sessions to be recorded using the add-on EyeToy camera technology – which somewhat diffuses Mason’s comment above about external networking systems being reliant on a digital camera. The PS2 version allowed for the recording of 5 second long videos, full track vocal performances and randomly taken digital photographs. However, these could only be viewed on the machine through which it was recorded. The PS3 version enables video to be recorded but the ‘expected’ destination is the closed community offered through ‘in-game’ options. Within this community a variety of gate-keeping activities are incorporated that include a globally standard, predetermined section of video that will be recorded, time restriction on video length (circa 30 seconds), a limit of 5 uploads per account and various parental controls. The effect of these restrictions, for the audience, is a short series of impoverished and peek-show shutter effect images. One of the authors has participated in this public exposition with the final result echoing a poor art house minimalism. Enabling a more seamless incorporation of video performances has been done with primary focus on the desire to produce and publicly display performance to the detriment of an ill-defined audience. The rationale and construction of the audience for the PS3 could be seen as Sony’s self-referential recognition of the generally poor performance produced by SingStar singers – implying that no one would want to watch for more than a few seconds. However, the performances found on YouTube suggest a much more sophisticated and varied audience – including thematic and fancy dress, partial reconstructions of the visual narrative, drinking ‘experiments’ and high scoring performances. The authors have all witnessed regular players watching YouTube recordings in the last category with the combined air of respect and music critic. The PS3’s barriers to the presentation of a complete performance are however readily circumvented – ironically other Sony technologies are implicated, Video Recorders such as the Sony HandyCam and mobile phones such as the high specification SonyEricsson N90 series cameraphones. Externally filmed SingStar performances escape the game’s imposed limitations concerning fixed length recordings and fixed camera position that the EyeToy usually requires. This approach enables a rich variety of performances to be recorded in their entirety and delivered to a technology that has ‘taught’ it’s users to watch TV online – YouTube; as one of the many Drunk SingStar videos prove[^7]. It is an important observation that while the PS3 version of the game offers a direct mechanism to post video online there is a significant and continually expanding repertoire of performances that present songs only available through the PS3 interface indicating that users are choosing to play the

[^7]: See: hk.youtube.com/watch?v=ODeH7YdcRw
new version of the game while continuing to use familiar and alternative technologies to record and distribute their performances.

5 Conclusion: SingStar for the PS4?

The popularity of the SingStar game and its engagement with cycles of continuous technical development highlight a number of issues surrounding the interrelationship of social and cultural experience with digital technology. The key issue raised by this paper and its focus upon the issues of reconfiguring access is the degree to which the concept of improvement is both subjective and the manner in which ‘upgrades’ privilege specific stakeholders. With the evolution from PS2 to PS3 the game’s developers have changed their strategy from ‘control’ (of the game play) to ‘gate keeping’ (of the interaction between the game, the players and the online resources they use to extend the game including SingStore and the recording of performances). There is admittedly an economic aspect to this shift in focus but the change also reflects a degree of nuanced recognition for the ways in which the game, in itself, has more visibly become part of a wider assemblage of technologies that players access seamlessly in order to make the game work insitu and to extend access to the game play experience. However, this recognition only goes so far. The game’s lead designer’s desire to allow playing of the new version of the game “in as seamless a way as possible” implies that the game will largely control this access where it is inevitably delivered through a linear process of menu selections rather than with a wider assemblage of technologies interacting together simultaneously (a relatively mundane challenge for trans-literate players).

Dutton’s view of reconfiguring access offers a systematic view of what is accessed through technology including people, services, information and technologies. SingStar provides exemplars for how, and even more importantly, to what extent access to each of these four categories has been reconfigured after the ‘upgrade’ to PS3. None of these changes can be considered universally beneficial or definitive improvements to the game itself. We similarly do not suggest that upgrade was a retrograde step but more simply ‘change’ that reflected the changing sociotechnical environments in which console games are played and the (improving) status of games within contemporary culture.

This paper offers insight into the cultural, political, social and economic machinations of games development, and by extrapolation technological ‘improvement’. While we have not specifically explored the implications that the reconfigured access embedded in the PS3 version of SingStar brings this work also lends itself to a variety of further debates including the relative merits of open versus closed source development (e.g. the relatively unknown status of the open source clone UltraStar), the degree to which visible and overly aggressive gate keeping by a game’s developers can have a negative influence on its popularity and the extent that particular technologies shape the social networks (both on and offline) its users choose to participate within. In what way could the PS4 further reconfigure access? The challenge for developers is to offer changes to the game that provides benefits for some players without hindering practices that become popular with others irrespective of their presence in or out of game. This raises the second challenge to developers, in the era of Web2.0 and user generated content, to relinquish the need, or the perceived need, to completely control the game. Superficial player control such as the ability to change a screen wallpaper (as is the case in the PS3 game) will currently satisfy most but even current technology does not prevent, for example, offering users the capacity to edit the pitch of note. Academics write about the co-production of technology but it is seemingly a brave developer that recognises and encourages this relationship.
6 References


