

DEFINING COMPUTER GAMES

GAMING AS KNOWING. GAME CULTURES AS SOCIETIES OF KNOWLEDGE?

A position paper by Kristine Ask

Online games (such as MMORPGs¹) meet at a compelling intersection of play, internet culture, new technologies and everyday life. The Game Studies field has often had the goal of finding distinctive aspects of play; to understand what distinguishes computer games from other artefacts, activities and expressions. It's been a search for entry points to the magic circle and what rules hold it in place. With this in mind, play has been defined as something separate from everyday life, something without consequences and something pleasurable. Obviously, play often holds such qualities, but this definition can also exclude elements that are vital to the experience (Malaby 2007). The practices users engage in show that "play" is not limited to simply controlling an avatar and experiencing emotions of joy or flow. There is a range of activities linked to the core engagement of play. Activities that might be enjoyable, but have no resemblance with the above definition. Together these practices make up the shifting and complex phenomenon that I will refer to as *gaming*. One such activity is the production and sharing of information about the game. In my doctoral work² I will look at the role of *knowledge* in MMORPG; what technologies are used, what networks are built and how it shapes game play. This approach has been inspired by observing the users themselves as conversations and interactions, in and outside the game, is permeated by discussions of the game's mechanics, lore and content. Why is knowing these things so important to players? MMORPG users are extremely active and productive and they participate on forums, make movies, write blogs and keep databases. Countless sites are dedicated to archiving, systematizing and debating what the game is about, how it should change- as well as practical information about how to perform actions in game. Playing becomes intrinsically linked to knowing, and knowing becomes as part of gaming.

Through the very design of MMORPGs the play is being intertwined and interwoven with other activities. The game involves interaction with other players, technologies and places, and because of that we need a kaleidoscopic approach to investigate and intersect the mess it provides at key points. Examples of how scholars have successfully been able to do this include approaches of economic transactions (Castranova 2006), social bonding across the online/offline divide (Taylor 2006) and co-production of content (Karlsen 2008). By avoiding sweeping statements about the nature or essence of MMORPGs, they have instead highlighted the diversity that is found within these synthetic worlds. I see knowledge is another such possible intersection. So, how may the framing of *knowing* further our understanding of games?

¹ MMORPG also known as Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games.

² My thesis will be a collection of articles with a focus on cooperation and knowledge in MMORPGs. This is then one of the angles I am presenting to better understand the MMORPG game culture. Other articles will focus on the different technologies used to facilitate cooperation.

As virtual worlds MMORPGs opens up for the interaction between players, and the challenges in game are designed to encourage grouping and cooperation. Such a challenge could be defeating a powerful dragon by banding together as a team of warriors, or it could be finding enough skilled craftsmen (or women) to create a magical item. In both cases it is likely that the players consult each other, as well as external sites, when finding a solution. What strategy should one use to defeat this dragon? Does it have any special abilities that players need to be aware of? And this magical item; what is the standard cost of the materials needed? What is its attributes? They might seem like inconsequential problems, but having the answers to these questions (or being able to find them) is what separates a good player from a poor one. To possess facts about the game enables successful gameplay and the game design rewards players who are knowledgeable about the workings of the game. Players who don't know that the dragon needs to be grounded with harpoons in order to fight her, will not be able to slay her and reap the rewards. Players who don't know that the market price of gold ore has declined will pay overprice for that magical item, wasting their monetary resources which have taken them hours to gain³. It is of course very possible to obtain this information by trial and error, but in MMORPGs where *time* is the great investment- it simply requires too much of it to find it all out by yourself. To have a chance at being a successful player you are dependant on other players' experience.

Learning takes more then one

The public debate around computer games have been marked by an understanding of play as a barren and wasteful activity, something that will dull both mind and social aptness. As a response to this, research done in the game studies field has shown that a multitude of intellectual activities are central to successful play. Some examples include the possibility for learning and construction of identities (Gee 2003), collaborative problem-solving (Squire, 2005) as well as fostering scientific habits of mind (Steinkuehler & Chmiel 2006). These contributions show users that are active, evolving and contributing. But, these studies focus largely on the benefit for the individual player, on how that player learn and take in new sets of skills. Furthermore, they tend to promote games as an alternate way of gaining specific skills, giving their work a practical and idealistic slant as they argue how games should be used in education. Even though it is a well-placed slant, I wish to focus on what these characteristics mean for the game community and the gaming experience. Learning about the game, and sharing information about it doesn't only happen on an individual level. It is a collective experience, a collective mentality. These aspects of learning and knowing are not bi-products of gaming, but are in fact defining features of MMORPG game culture.

³ Both of these examples are actual "facts" from the game World of Warcraft. The dragon in question is called Razorscale and to kill her you need to protect the NPCs (Non Player Characters) fixing harpoon turrets from her viscidious attacks, so that turrets can later be used to ground and kill her. The gold ore on the other hand has gone from beeing a precious metal used by many, to a relatively cheap metal used by few.

I will look at practices of knowing in the light of *epistemic cultures*, cultures that create and warrant knowledge. The thesis will look at what epistemic machineries are put in place to create and share knowledge in and about online games, making me concerned with finding out “how we know what we now” (Knorr Cetina 1999). This include both identifying game mechanics that support the “knowing player”, as well as studying places outside the game that are important to creation and sharing of knowledge. In this context knowledge is not scientific, but the community in question has several features marking them as a society of knowledge. It has locations where it is gathered (in game), tools to gather it with (logs and user programmed software), it has experts (famous players), peer discussion (as ideas and opinions get discussed in public forums) and means to publish it (blogs, movies etc.). They build systems to facilitate the making and sharing of knowledge and embed these into gameplay. They might be gamers and not scholars, but they do produce their own truths.

By using this approach I am also trying to bring the field of Science and Technology studies (STS) closer to the Game Studies field. The theoretical framework of STS has much to offer in the study of computer games. Firstly it highlights the technology, ensuring that the many artefacts of everyday life don't remain as missing masses, forgotten and overlooked, when tools of analysis don't allow for human and non-human actors to be seen in connection to each other. The “computer” in “computer games” is also of relevance, yet it is often overlooked. Secondly STS has a rich tradition within user studies, showing users as productive and participatory. Technologies have an interpretative flexibility that opens for many types of use, including use that goes against the designer's intentions (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2007). STS then offers concepts to deal with the entanglement of socio-technical networks such as those found in games. In regards to the production knowledge, the role of the user is central.

The ways in which players have chosen to create and share information about the game shows a *re-description* of the game. The players are taking the script (Akrich 1992), the underlying expectations and guidelines for how the game is to be used, and re-scribe it with the many sites that exist around the game, and the ways they get integrated into gameplay. It is true that the game design itself encourages cooperation and the sharing of knowledge between players, but it does not facilitate or communicate that it needs to happen on such a scale. There are movies showing strategies, blogs that reflect on the social aspects of online culture, databases that have detailed information about items and their value, and forums that discuss the underlying algorithms that govern the outcome of in game abilities. It is for the most part volunteer work, though some are attempting to make a profit by selling their neatly written guides. It is entirely dependant on players wanting to spend time outside the game learning about how to do better in game, and other players wanting to share what they know about it. It is through this a joint effort, something that defines the community. And, when brought into game, something that becomes a part of the gameplay.

My empirical data is, and will be, gathered from in depth interviews with players and participatory observation in the MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW). By combining the two I hope to aggregate general knowledge about the game mechanics and structures, and well as seeing the “knowledge in play” so to speak. By complementing this with interviews is also gives a chance to bring in the reflections and practices of other players and their relation to this aspect of the game. The game World of Warcraft is a huge commercial success with over 12 million players world wide. It has also received due attention in the academic arena with great interest in both its emergent gamer culture as well as game design (see f.ex Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008). It is chosen because of its central position in MMORPG culture due to its popularity, but also because it has a vibrant and active community surrounding the game.

In conclusion: my thesis investigates what it means for a gaming culture to be permeated by practices of learning and knowledge, and in what ways that becomes part of the gaming experience. Can we say that gaming is knowing?

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