

Innovative frames of play

Virtual worlds used for ludic (playful) interactions, whether they are games or open playful worlds such as Second Life have rules. A great number of these rules are programmed, such as the inability for an avatar to fly. But there are also a large number of rules which exist at a social level of interaction, such as people agreeing to speak in-character during role-play activities. Sometimes such rules are specified legalistically and formally in the form of end-user agreements of the software, but often they arise unexpectedly. When we think about user-driven innovation in virtual worlds we often only think of changes to the technology or novel utilisation of the technology within the bounds of the technology. Our discussion focuses on innovations achieved by users creating new social frames which are transformations of the frames afforded by the technology of any given virtual world.

Background

We utilise Erving Goffman's (1974) frame analysis to examine the tension caused between different frames of user-created innovative play and the ongoing design of virtual worlds. Goffman argues that any activity will be perceived by its participants in terms of a primary framework of rules, conventions and premises which provide the basis of the definition of a given situation. Furthermore, such frameworks can undergo systematic transformations known as keyings. A keying can be seen as a new definition of a situation based on a known existing frame (p 45). For example, a game of Monopoly with the addition of "house-rules" is a keying of the usual frame of play in Monopoly or a play fight is a keying of a real fight.

Using frame analysis, we argue that keyings of virtual worlds can be viewed as acts of design, some of them innovative in their change to what participants in an activity understand is going on. Behaviours by players around the creation of "house-rules" may not be seen as a typical use of the word 'design'. However, we hope to foster more discussion on this issue, particularly in its relation to the creation of meaning and the sense making people undergo when confronted by new keyings of virtual worlds, i.e. new and innovative ways of framing virtual worlds. We also argue that people gain something akin to a vocabulary of keyings when becoming competent players within virtual worlds.

Case Studies

Two examples from research into the virtual worlds of Defence of the Ancients (DotA) and World of Warcraft (WoW) will help illustrate our points. The studies were qualitative in nature, drawing data from interviews, focus groups, grounded analysis of game recordings posted on websites, forum threads, machinima and participant observation. This holistic approach gave insights not only to the game play of games, but to the situating of the games as part of broader virtual worlds.

The DotA study involved the grounded analysis game replays and interviews with ten players. DotA does not meet all the criteria of the usual definitions of VWs such as persistence, however it does have many characteristics that make it relevant to our discussion. It also has a vibrant and engaged community of players who interact with one another through various 'paratexts' (Consalvo, 2007) such as discussion boards, online forums and extended and new narratives. Our data gathering certainly took these into account and we would argue that the DotA community can certainly be viewed as a quasi-virtual world which can be used to give insights into other technologies more traditionally thought of as virtual worlds.

The World of Warcraft study consisted of group interviews with 19 players in addition to the analysis of the types of paratext mentioned above. The study was part of a larger project into the social World of Warcraft.

Defence of the Ancients (DotA)

The first study we draw on in our discussion focused on Defence of the Ancients, a player made modification of Blizzard's game Warcraft 3. It is tempting in any analysis of virtual worlds that have been appropriated by passionate users to focus on the innovations made by those making changes to the technology. In the case of DotA, this would mainly consist of the actions of the mysterious developer IceFrog and the new and innovative game he continues to make out of Warcraft 3. However, the most interesting innovations for this analysis do not come from the keying of Warcraft 3 to DotA by IceFrog, but instead from the keying of DotA by its players at a level of play. Or to put it another way, the creation and negotiation of new rules and conventions by the players of DotA as they play and interact within the virtual community.

In DotA, teams of players attempt to destroy an opposing team's base. There is a perceived natural order or a rough affordance in the acts of attempting to destroy the outer defenses of a base first, followed by middle and finally the inner defences. This perceived order can also rely on the location and actions of non-player controlled characters (NPCs) known as creeps. Players refer to behaviour which partially or fully ignores this perceived natural order as backdooring, or as one participant described it:

"You can't run up and break a tower before your creeps get there. You have to take them in order... I think. It would take the fun out of the game. It messes up the flow of the game."

Many players frame DotA as consisting of the coded game as well as additional rules and conventions around acts ignoring or maintaining the natural order of destroying the opposing team's base. However, different players hold different views over what the natural order is and should be. We found that competent players know and understand the different versions of the backdooring rule. Do you require the aid of non-player controlled characters to have framed the game correctly? To what extent? Are the outer defences fair game for ignoring or re-defining the natural order? The differing views of these three players (who have been known to play with each other) illustrates this point:

"We don't approve backdooring in [place removed] it's really not ethical to backdoor. Simply because backdooring is really easy to do when you're in another lane and oh this lane is free. Kill tower. Go back. It's a cheap way of winning if you are losing, [...you would only backdoor] when you are absolutely sure you are going to win anyway. A stalemate. Let's just force the game a bit."

"In [place removed], you're never allowed to destroy the towers without creeps. But here I've seen people just going in front of the creeps and destroying the towers [laughs]. But, I don't get the reason. They seem to justify it."

"Some people have this notion that this thing is against the spirit of how it's supposed to be done. I don't care. If it can be done, do it, provided there is no [social] rules to say you can't."

It appears that players who have gained a certain level of competency within the virtual world of DotA have what might be labelled as a vocabulary of frames they can draw upon during play. Players may have an opinion as to what the one true way of playing DotA is, but they also have the ability to frame the game with different versions of the backdooring rule/s which they know are used by other communities of players.

Previous work (Harrop, 2009) has partially dealt with the mechanisms for negotiating which rules and hence which frame of play will be used in a given game. Based on this work and the second study (described below), we would like to suggest as a discussion point that there is a frame for changing frames. Such a frame is a keying of the frame of play: a systematic alteration of what, for players, is really going on. This frame comes with its own rules and conventions as to how to change or switch the original frame. The frame for changing frames is not a pause, time-out, or full stopping of the game, since play within the virtual world continues to run as negotiation of rules and frames occurs. It can therefore be considered a keying, in a minor departure from a normal reading of Goffman's work. For example, disputes over the backdooring rule (or other negotiations such as exchange of players to balance teams) do not result in a stoppage of play, but instead produce a temporary slowing or other minor change to play. Crucially, this moment has its own rules and conventions which allow for the eventual change in the keying to be successfully achieved. [1]. The complexity and subtlety of such acts of design indicate the high level which user-driven innovation has reached; in this sense at least, players appear to lead designers in flexible innovation.

The ongoing negotiation, conflict between frame and the creation of new ways of framing DotA by players are in essence acts of design. They are ways of creating innovative game play – in this case the construction of some version of a natural order – beyond the coded virtual world. The natural order of DotA is negotiated amongst players as they develop and modify the meaning of the game.

World of Warcraft (WoW)

The second study we draw on comes from current research on World of Warcraft (WoW). World of Warcraft and its gameplay should need no introduction to this audience, particularly the social aspects such as competency amongst couples (Carr, 2009), social interactions in high-end/end-game content (Chen, 2009) and entire books concerned with the culture of WoW (Corneliusson, 2008).

In this study, we focused on the social conventions and game mechanics involved in the distribution of 'loot' (in-game items such as swords and shields) between players. In particular, our work has examined how recent changes to the gameplay mechanics (hard coded rules) in a recent patch (3.3) of the game have been made by the designers to emulate and enforce pre-existing social conventions. These social conventions are themselves keyings and derivations of earlier activities found in table-top role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons. An interesting discussion of the frames used in such games can

be found in 'Shared Fantasy' (Fine, 1983) which focuses on many of the social conventions of play at the time.

Our research goes further and explores how players have responded to the changes in turn by both re-defining social conventions that seem to both support and subvert the original intention of the changes to game play mechanics. Disparate player-frames in dealing with loot issues and the ensuing (mild) controversies have resulted in subsequent patching/changing of the game mechanics. In this to-and-fro between designers and players, game mechanics and player frames we find an un-choreographed yet intricate dance of development and change. It is a dance that designers often lead and players follow, but sometimes it is the players who are leading the dance:

"I bet at Blizzard one of their main things on their list is loot. People getting the wrong loot. The very fact that now you can pass stuff between people, it alleviates mistakes effectively. However, they have created a problem for themselves because now when you pug a run [play with unknown people], not everyone is from the same realm. So someone picks up some loot that you want, even though you can trade... they left: that's it, they ran off with it. So they solved the problem, they created a new one. Back to square one. "

WoW is rich in varying social frames of play. Over time, players have come up with additional rules and conventions concerning the distribution of loot amongst teams. Elaborate systems amongst guilds of players called Dragon Kill Points (DKP) arose, which have been analyzed by Fairfield (2006), Malone (2009) and Silverman (2009) with emphasis on the economics of the virtual world, social capital and control systems.

Our research focused on the distribution of loot in 5 player dungeons where WoW allows for players to roll a digital dice. When an item is dropped by a recently deceased NPC, each player rolls either Need, Greed or Pass. Players rolling Greed will be randomly given a number, the player with the highest number is given the item by the game. However, players who choose to roll Need trump any players choosing to roll Greed. If two or more players roll Need, the player with the highest number wins the item and it is deposited directly into their inventory. Players choosing pass are giving up their chance to get the item [2]. One participant described the system succinctly:

"Greed if you want it. Need if you really need it.... and pass if you want to. That was probably the general rule of thumb."

Different communities of players keyed the distribution differently. In some communities, the convention would be for players to pass on just about everything, roll Greed if an item was of some help to their character and only roll Need if an item was something they had been seeking. Items that no-one rolled for would be sold and the money distributed amongst the group. In other groups, pass was never utilised, resulting in players rolling Greed by default to allow chance/fate to decide fairly over time. This is reflected in an interesting general rule of thumb one group of participants discussed:

"This is something I've picked up on. PvP servers seem to think that Need is the default button. PvE seem to think that Greed is the default button, [...] because I certainly know that on an RP

[Role Play] server, if there was likely anything to be argued about, on my server the default was actually to pass."

However this particular pattern was not entirely agreed upon by other participants in the group interview and exceptions were noted.

These and other innovative frames for loot distribution were unsettled when the software developers made a number of changes, including allowing players of different communities/realms to play with each other. The result to date has been a homogenisation of the way loot is distributed using social conventions. Before the changes, players had a vocabulary of many different frames for loot distribution. This vocabulary was the result both of player movement between different servers and experiences with many types of loot items. Thus frames could be changed flexibly and rapidly when players were presented with unfamiliar loot items, or with new or different player behaviours. As different communities with different dominant frames came together, the flexibility that was permitted by competent players possessing a large vocabulary of frames allowed for less conflict in the process of moving towards one dominant frame across many servers. Furthermore, broad and sophisticated vocabularies minimise the need to reason out what actions are appropriate in new situations.

"Prior to last patch everyone greeded the frozen orbs on our realm, but most of the people you run into nowadays the default is need."

"On our server, most people got to the point where it was like urgh, another orb's dropped. Everybody rolls greed. But [another server] on the same battleground as us, got to the point where: urgh, orb's dropped. Everybody need. And so when those two collided, everyone was like 'what the hell are you doing yoinking all of these.' But on our server now it has just become the standard. You just roll need on them. "

To elaborate, some players key this new system as meaning "if I can roll 'need' then I will 'need' irrespective of the utility of the item for me... if the game allows it then I'll do it". While others will only 'need' on items useful to the current role they are playing in the party. Yet others will adopt the attitude, "if I need it, I 'need' it, even if it is needed for a different role to the one I am currently playing". These various keyings can result in conflict over who deserves or should receive a particular loot item. Given the need to protect oneself against the greed of others (pun) but still be a sociable player, the dominant keying that seems to have emerged is the third one listed above.

As in our DotA example above, negotiation between players could occur within a frame for changing frames, provided the competency of the players had led to a large enough vocabulary of frames from which to choose. A lack of frame vocabulary has the potential to be utilised as a definition for what constitutes a noob or newbie player. Further analysis and discussion will be centred around Goffman's "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959) and his stance on the management of impressions through providing evidence of competencies.

Part of the competency users gain in virtual worlds is having a vocabulary of frames on which they can draw on during playful encounters. These frames are innovations which systematically transform what, for

participants, is really going on. Perhaps the different player types suggested by Bartle (1997) and Yee (2007) are part of these vocabularies. For example, some players may view the frame of a situation as playing a game for the purposes of role playing, while others see the right frame as playing a game for the purposes of exploring a virtual world.

From our research it is becoming apparent that any act of design by developers (software or content) which restricts the vocabulary of innovative frames (themselves acts of design) available to players puts the enjoyability and diversity of virtual worlds at risk. Changes to the software unsettle the frames and vocabulary of players, but ultimately their competencies allow for a resettling of frames. We wish to discuss and analyse these points further in a workshop setting.

Conclusions

We have focused our discussions on only one of the two basic transformations Goffman argues frames can undergo, that is the systematic transformation acknowledged by all participants known as keying. Future research will focus on the second kind of basic transformation Goffman proposes: Fabrications. Fabrications are transformations of frames where there is an intentional effort to manage activity so others are induced into a false belief about what is really going on (p 83-123). Some fabrications come in the form of grief play (see Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003; Foo & Koivisto, 2004), including activities which can be considered as benign and playful deceit (Goffman, 1974, p 87). Such activities are typically pranks or cons, themselves innovative and can result in new frames for the vocabulary individuals have at their disposal.

Footnotes

[1] An analogous frame for changing frames can be found in children's chasing games. In such games, play activities do not stop when rules or versions of rules are being negotiated. The chase continues at a slower pace with players keeping proportional distances from each other while the rest of the game may be progressing at normal speed around them. There are clear conventions around entering and leaving such frames.

[2] A fourth option, which is a variation on the Greed choice is for player to choose to 'disenchant' the item. This option is only available if a player with the required 'disenchanting' skill is in the party. Disenchanting is rolled at the same priority level as the Greed option.

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