

Playmakers in Multiplayer Game Communities: Their Importance and Motivations for Participation

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ABSTRACT

In many game-like open-ended multiplayer communities, the success of the game, and well-being of the community, depends on the efforts of certain individuals who arrange resources for game-play to other players. These include e.g. game masters, server hosts, and fan site creators. We identify the importance of these voluntary "playmakers" by describing their activities in four communities: (1) Habbo Hotel moderators, creative room designers and fan site builders, (2) Live-action role-playing game masters and non-player characters, (3) Geocaching cache creators, and (4) Neverwinter Nights dungeon masters, player guides, developers, and server hosts. Based on an analysis of this empirical data we describe motivations that the playmakers have for participation in game community activities. Such descriptions will help to improve design for games where playmaker involvement is of critical importance to the game's success.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - Games.

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Multiplayer games, Communities, Computer games, Motivations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking at the history of computer games, it is easy to notice that the concept of multiplayer game environments has proved to be one of the best selling game categories. Starting from the pioneering work around MUDs in the late 1970's an ending with Counter-Strike and other Half-Life modifications, Neverwinter Nights, and Star Wars Galaxies, these games have also been influential in the visions of pervasive and alternate reality games. In

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the light of their success, it is important to ask what is special in multi-player open-ended games that makes them a superb concept. The possibility to play with other people instead of computers is definitively one of the key issues. But arenas where people can meet and play require a flux of new content e.g. in the form of adventures, and consequently special kind of nurturing efforts from certain active individuals in the communities. Since this phenomenon of some players providing resources for gameplay for others – *play-making* – is a distinctive feature of multiplayer gaming, this activity is worth a closer investigation.

In this paper, we approach the phenomenon with two questions: (1) What are the tasks and activities that playmakers take care of in the communities? (2) What motivates their participation? We are especially interested in the voluntary ways of participation, and consequently do not include the activities of employed people into the definition of playmaking. Playmaking activities are presented in four game-like environments that differ in size, mediating technologies, age groups, and type of the game. These are thriving communities and therefore understanding their practices is important in the design of new games.

2. RELATED RESEARCH

Previous research on the social organization of activity in multiplayer game communities has addressed the interaction during the game-play (e.g. [3,7]) or has created categories of different player types [1,5] or motivations of ordinary players [9]. However, more important to this paper are the categorisations that include aspects of meta-gaming and playmaking. Bartle's "Live Team" categorization [2] has this aspect but focuses on activities motivated with monetary profit. Wright's model of players as producers [8, pp. 539-544], on the other hand, is not derived from multiplayer games. However, two studies are important to the present research questions.

In a description of Habitat, a game-like open-ended multiplayer community, Farmer [4] has grouped the players according to five distinct patterns of usage and social commitment. He has identified *Passives*, who want to be entertained, ordinary *Actives*, *Motivators*, who make life interesting for others, *Caretakers*, who help newcomers, mediate conflicts and note bugs, and *Geek Gods* who are designers and implementers. While thus recognizing playmaking, Farmer's article does not address what motivates the Motivators and other playmakers.

The other study is by Kollock [6]. He uses Mauss's classical theory of the social meanings of gift-giving to analyze exchange of voluntary contributions in Usenet news communities. These con-

tributions include free help, advices and answers to technical questions as well as reviews on new technological products. He explains this activity with motivations that rest on self-interest and rational actions. The model suggests that providers anticipate *reciprocal* help from others, are interested in increasing *personal reputation*, and want to have an *impact on the community*. As motivations that have also an altruistic component he adds *collective needs* that the provider also shares with the community, and a deeper *commitment to the community* in which collective needs are in line with the personal needs. We will contrast his findings later in the paper to the ones originating from our case studies.

3. CASE STUDIES

The four communities described below were chosen for a study because of their particular social patterns of cooperation. The findings are based on qualitative research methods: ethnographic observations, co-organizing community events, interviewing, focus groups and analyses of website content. The following subsections provide overviews of the game communities and the playmaking roles. The findings are summarized in a table in the end of the section along with instances from interviews.

3.1 Habbo Hotel

Habbo Hotel (www.habbo.fi) by Sulake Labs is a graphical chat and game environment for teenagers where every user plays a simple cartoon-like character. There is no subscription fee, but if you want to decorate your own hotel room, you have to pay for the furniture. Habbo Hotel has become very popular among people with 10-14 years of age.

Fansites (amateur websites produced by and for fans) have emerged around the Habbo hotel. In a survey of Finnish fansites we identified 173 fansites, of which we focused on the 5 official and 32 active fansites. **Fansite builders** write typically for a large audience, providing the following Habbo content: news and rumours, links, guestbook, hints and guidelines, reviews and lists, fashion reports, celebrity interviews, pictures & screenshots, fan-site and author information. In addition, some fansites provide a discussion forum, either for all Habbos or for a specific group in Habbo. Thus, the fansites serve three important functions: they complement the official website, strengthen the governance policies of the producer, and maintain the social world around Habbo.

Based on interviews, the fansite builders are motivated with getting approval, getting friends, doing things for fun, using writing skills, and becoming respected. In addition, analysis on format and content of the fansites shows also that fansite builders want to connect themselves with the whole Habbo community, be able to influence the ways how other people behave in Habbo, provide a place to debate on important topics of Habbo, and to be able to link avatar names to real persons via fansite content (although not much appreciated by Sulake).

Within Habbo, one of the popular things to do is to do 'interior design' by buying furniture and decorating a hotel room of one's own. In a web survey (N=10 613) at the news section on the Habbo Hotel frontpage we asked what these **creative room designers** wanted to get with their room. In this multiple choice question, 31% answered "furniture", 66% "friends", 37% "publicity in Habbo", 11% "publicity on fansites". 18% answered "something else", with explications related mostly to aspects of fun,

admiration, and providing nicely decorated chat rooms for others (see Table 1 for examples).

Hobbos are voluntary guides and moderators in Habbo who can mediate in conflicts, warn misbehaving Habbos, kick them out of the hotel rooms, or ban them from the hotel. In a theme interview with two Hobbos we heard that one motivation for becoming a moderator is to take responsibility for the community. These players see that since they are present into the community anyway, they can resolve conflicts without too much extra effort. Other motivations were that becoming a Hobba is a way to 'climb' socially in the community and to become famous.

3.2 Live-action role-playing

Live-action role-playing games (LARPs) are organized events where players gather together to experience living in a fictitious world. Typically, LARPs are situated in fantasy worlds, but there are also many games that explore gender and political issues of today's society. The following descriptions are based on participation in four LARPs in different parts of Finland, interviews with players and game masters, and acting as co-authors in one game together with two experienced players.

LARPs are organized by **game masters** (GMs). From them, arrangements require a lot of effort before the event: writing descriptions of fictitious game characters for each participating player, match-making players' wishes with the set of available characters, and arranging the milieu where the game can be played. Preparations for a game are usually started months in advance, and carried out jointly by multiple GMs. Although the preparations are laborious, being a GM is quite popular. Reasons are diverse: one has a possibility to do something creative, publish one's creative works, make people happy, get players to have "common play" together, see how one's fictitious world comes alive, gain reputation in the community, write a game that no-one has yet realized, and be together with friends.

However, in order to create an exciting game, GMs usually require also help from other people to make the game interesting. GMs usually have friends who act as human props, i.e. as characters whose actions are partly pre-determined by GMs. These people are called **non-player characters** (NPCs). NPCs may be needed to change the course of action in the game in a pre-planned manner, or to do non-adventurous tasks such as serving food for players. NPCs can also help GMs to prepare and stage the game milieu. Identified reasons for being an NPC were a wish to lend a helping hand to a fellow GM, be trusted by a respected GM by having a central position in the game, and creating good game for other players.

Other subtypes of LARP playmakers are **artisans** who are skilled in crafting props like costumes and real-looking weaponry and may sell them for players, and **active members of role-playing clubs** who are editors of fanzines and who arrange weekly meetings, cooperation between different player groups and clubs in different cities, and so on. However, because of the focus on the actual game-play, not on indirect effects, these playmakers' motivations for participation were not investigated.

3.3 Geocaching

In Geocaching (www.geocaching.com) the core activity is Internet-mediated outdoor treasure hunting with the aid of a GPS de-

vice. The hunt trip is planned in advance by choosing from a list of caches and their locations at the community's website. The location can be anything from an easy-to-reach view of a landscape to an urban scene that can only be reached with the means of parkour or rock-climbing. When the hunt is over, it is reported on the community website, and one more credit is gained from this latest "found". Caches that are difficult to find or that are done with a new style increase the fame of their creators.

Especially among more experienced geocachers the structure and ideas in multi-caches are evaluated as skilful pieces of art. The variety of caches created by different **cache creators** makes the hobby appealing to many. In the case of a typical cache, the creator puts a log book (leaflet), an explanatory note on the Geocaching hobby and an item in a weatherproof container and hides it in an interesting place. The coordinates of the location, ratings for overall difficulty and the terrain difficulty, verbal hints, and perhaps some photos are then published in the geocaching.com site – after the reviewer has checked from the cache report that the cache doesn't brake rules of safety and good manners. Every time when someone marks the cache as found, the cache creator gets an email. The founder is also responsible for maintaining the cache.

Cache creators are motivated with a possibility to become famous as a creator of certain type of caches, contributing to the people and the community, and being a part of a big, widely spread hobby.

3.4 Neverwinter Nights

Neverwinter Nights (NWN) is a fantasy role-playing game that can be played either in a single-player mode on one computer or with other people using an Internet connection. It has been designed to support self-organizing game communities, by providing a special interface for dungeon masters to lead game sessions, and tools for communities to adapt the game with modifications and new content (such as creatures and items). By containing these tools, and not requiring a monthly subscription fee, NWN has become very popular.

For this study, a game server called Narfell was chosen for an investigation. Narfell is a community with appr. 250 active and 1400 registered players. IRC interviews covered 23 informants from 8 countries, ranging between 18 to 38 years of age.

In NWN, **dungeon masters** (DMs) have the same role as GMs in LARP. They lead game-play sessions and stage situations for player groups who then must cooperate and react to the situations in order to make progress in the game. To coordinate game events, DMs have private IRC meetings each week where they can plan ahead and exchange information. What DMs like is being able to create exciting game experiences to players, plan new adventures, and invent new challenges and see how players solve them. To do this, they must take into consideration players' opinions of exciting adventures, and be responsive to players' wishes. Because of the high player-DM ratio, communicating these issues does not always work well. Therefore a group called **player guides** (led by a player leader) has been established to act as a broker between the two parties. Player guides told that they like helping others, having an acknowledged position, and serving the community.

New functionalities to Narfell are created by players called **developers** in cooperation with DMs. Their work makes the game world distinctive from other servers, enables DMs to plan novel

adventures and helps to maintain a dynamic game world with new things to explore. The developers' motivations are close to hackers in computer communities: they like to create new functionalities and see their influence on the game world.

The eventual playmaking role is that of a **server owner**. In Narfell, the owner was also the leader DM, and he wanted to realize his dream of an optimal NWN game world, and keep authorship and the final word of its activities.

Table 1 summarizes the statements that playmakers provided in the case studies. To analyze them, we used Kollock's typology of non-altruistic motivations as the starting point for a data-driven qualitative analysis. The statements made by different playmakers were grouped together by treating all the statements as a single data set across different playmakers in different communities. The categories by Kollock were extended when needed and described also in more detail by forming sub-categories.

4. RESULTS

The empirical data of playmakers has three categories that are also listed by Kollock: playmakers' *community orientation* (combining Kollock's motivations of anticipated reciprocity and attachment to the community), *personal reputation*, and *effect on the environment* (in line with Kollock). An addition to Kollock's theory is the category of motivations related to *socializing*.

Community orientation is about the playmaker's inclination to the community that s/he has learnt to know through experience, and whose existence in the future is a value in itself. It is further divided into the following sub-categories, both mentioned by Kollock: (1) *attachment to the community* (altruistic motivations such as serving the community and taking responsibility), and (2) *anticipated reciprocity* (self-interested motivations when a playmaker perceives a possibility for a balance of mutual contributions over time between members).

Personal reputation is about motivations that increase the playmaker's personal esteem in the community. These manifest in efforts to gain power or rewards from other members. The sub-categories are: (1) *social climbing and keeping the social position* (when the reputation is based on a personal competence or position in the ecology of a community), and (2) *seeking approval* (by being appreciated among one's companions).

Effect on the environment is based on the importance of being able to cause positive effects in the community. This category incorporates the creative aspects of involvement in communities: (1) *self-actualization* is about personal rewards for participation, and (2) *enriching the game world* contains issues where one can see others reacting to his or her contributions to the game environment.

Pure **socializing** in the community is the category that Kollock does not address, due to the grounding of explanations on gift-giving practices. But in our case, participation in the community is also a social activity, and therefore a starting point to many friendships. This has two parts: (1) *gaining new possibilities for socializing*, and (2) *passing the time with existing friends*, through having fun with others by participating in activities.

Table 1. A summary of playmakers in four different game communities and their explanations for participation.

Game	Playmaker type	Motivations for participation mentioned by the studied playmakers	
Habbo Hotel	Fansite builders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting approval • Getting friends • Fun • Using writing skills • Becoming respected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being connected with the whole Habbo community • Debating important topics of Habbo • Seeing “behind the mask” of anonymity • Explaining the norms
	Creative room builders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun and good mood • Getting admiration and compliments • Getting listed in V.I.P. lists • Making people happy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting more fun into Habbo • Getting a girlfriend • Creating a nice discussion environment
	Hobbas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking responsibility for the community • Becoming famous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Climbing’ socially in the community • Fun
Live-action role-playing	Game masters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility to do something creative • Publishing one’s creative works • Making people happy • Getting players to have “common play” together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing how one’s fictitious world comes alive • Gaining reputation in the community • Writing a game that no-one has yet realized • Being together with friends
	Non-player characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being trusted by a respected GM by having a central position in the game 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lending a helping hand to a fellow GM • Creating good game for other players
Geocaching	Cache creators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming famous • Being part of a bigger activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributing to the community
Neverwinter Nights	Dungeon masters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating exciting game experiences • Plan new adventures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventing new challenges and seeing how players solve them
	Player guides and the player leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping other players • Having an acknowledged position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving the community
	Developers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating new functionalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing one’s influence on the game world
	Server owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realizing one’s dream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping the control

5. DISCUSSION

This paper has highlighted the importance of one special player segment in multi-player games – named playmakers – by describing their roles in four different successful communities. Compared to previous research, our empiric data is distinctive, because it covers multiple communities and focuses on the motivations of a specific player segment.

The findings open new questions on three major aspects. First, we need to study the playmaker life-cycle: why does somebody become a playmaker, and how the playmaker motivations change over time. Second, the design implications made in this paper are rather implicit, and more work is needed to explicating them in relation to previous design guidelines. Finally, it could be worth making the core theoretical concepts more rigid, for instance by reflecting on the relations between motivation and action. Another theoretical aspect that needs more investigation is the interaction between playmakers and players. The present study has identified different types of playmakers in certain game communities, but has not yet analyzed situations of conflicting playmaking motivations, community crises and their relations to playmaking.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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