Fish Bowl: Exploring the Differences in Players' Ability to Co-Create Games

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ABSTRACT
Individual players are active co-creators and co-producers of digital games. In this workshop, we investigate the influence that their creativity, skills and knowledge have on games. Nevertheless, their individual ability to influence the game development or game experience varies depending on the factors such as gender, geographic barriers or access to technology. Focusing on the genre of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and using data from the case study of Star Citizen by Cloud Imperium Games, the notion of ‘asymmetry’ in individual players’ ability to influence the development or experience of a game is introduced. By inviting DiGRA 2014 attendees to participate in a ‘fish bowl’ workshop format, this work aims to correlate the prevalence of asymmetries with the impact that different demographics of players have on games. Together with the workshop participants, we explore a broad array of those asymmetries and demonstrate why game developers should be aware of them.

Keywords
Co-creation, game development, player community, MMOG, fishbowl, ethnicity, gender

PLAYERS AS CO-CREATORS
We discuss some of the implications of the recently emerging practice in online games of involving players in production of games as both market and cultural artefacts (Banks and Potts, 2010). Basing our observations on the development of Star Citizen (2014) by Cloud Imperium Games, and the player cultures that have arisen around it, we identify circumstances contributing to asymmetrical influence of individual players’ creativity, skills and knowledge on the game. Co-creation of digital games is defined here as “consumers contributing a non-trivial component of the design, development, production, marketing and distribution of a new or existing product” (Hartley et al., 2013, p. 21). This empowerment of players as co-creators is reflected by players being increasingly viewed by the industry actors as a resource in game development; with the games themselves as platforms enabling their creativity (Malaby, 2009). Players become involved in production of game assets, community building and support, quality assurance, design of...
game-world systems, word-of-mouth/marketing efforts, as well as in financing of games’ development.

**ASYMMETRIES IN PLAYERS’ INPUTS TO CO-CREATION**

Individual players have different input ability to co-creation of games. Depending on their personal context, as well as social opportunities, their participation in shaping of a game is not the same, leading to asymmetries in their co-creative ability. Those asymmetries appear outside of the immediate context of play, reflecting wider circumstances of a player’s life situation. As players are becoming increasingly influential co-creators of games, those circumstances also begin to play prominent role in the evolution of game cultures and play behaviours. Following on Banks and Potts (2010), those asymmetries can pertain to games as cultural products, as well as market offerings, and are defined as a set of individual circumstances for every player, which affect their ability and propensity to engage in influential co-creative behaviour. This set of circumstances remains, at the same time, outside of any studio’s control or marketing scope. As such, those asymmetries constitute a significant (yet difficult to pinpoint) external influence on the way that video game cultures evolve, as well as on the types and tastes of audiences to which games cater. Examples of circumstances leading to asymmetries in players’ co-creative ability include: belonging to ethnic or sexual minorities (Shaw, 2009), geographic location, gender (Chess, 2010; Graner-Ray, 2003), language barriers, level of education, or access to technology (Magnet, 2006).

Individual players have different ability to engage in co-creation of games, and thus to influence its makeup as a cultural artefact and a market offering. In this session, it is our intention to identify different kinds of asymmetries, categorize them, as well as to map their potential influence on games. In order to inform the games industry about shifting tastes of players and factors outside of their community management practices, the impact that asymmetries have on games needs to be understood. We will correlate the prevalence of asymmetries with impact that different demographics of players have on games. Mapping that impact builds on the current trend of integrating industrial practice and game studies.

In addition, the session will provide a forum that discusses the overlaps and efficiencies between socio-cultural context and commercial rationale. Furthermore, the discussion of asymmetries from the academic perspective could provide the industry with insights into factors that are outside of studios’ purview, but which influence the player base nevertheless. With co-creation remaining an essentially player-driven process, the external circumstances of players are directly reflected upon studio’s marketing process, the commercial performance of its games, as well as evolution of socio-cultural meanings of games.

**METHODOLOGY AND SESSION OUTLINE**

This session will be in a ‘fish bowl’ format. Since the asymmetries can result from a great variety of social, cultural, economic, political or psychological factors (just to name a few), we strongly believe that this format will support bringing contributions from a variety of disciplines together. In addition, as most of the sessions in DiGRA are set up as presentation or panel format, we think that the conference will be enriched by a format that creates dynamic participation among attendees and capitalizes the group’s knowledge (Segar, 2009).
The group will contribute, discuss and build on its own perspectives that move the discussion forward. The room will be arranged in concentric circles with four seats in the middle, the ‘hot seats’. Facilitators will present for five minutes a brief background on this topic and share examples of asymmetry. Then we will invite others to contribute by seating in the ‘hot seats’. Participants in the ‘hot seats’ will share their perspectives and engage in dialogue with one another. Participants in outer concentric circles can witness, take notes and prepare to participate when a ‘hot seat’ is available. A volunteer will take notes throughout the session in order to capture themes and relevant information. The data gathered will be summarized and reflected back to participants in the last five minutes of the session. All interested will receive an email copy of the session notes. We hope that this discussion will raise valuable questions that can lead to independent projects, book chapters or proposals among DIGRA colleagues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY