The Digital Gamer and the Loss of the Power Fantasy

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Short Abstract:

The concept of games being a form of "power fantasy" for the player is a common tool for describing or advertising them. This seems to be counter to the interests of digital games makers, however. This paper is based on ethnographic observations of different digital games and the ways in which the mechanics and organizational systems in them have lessened individual power for both the game player and the game character. We find that there are both mechanical as well as social influences that cause one to accept this changing power dynamic. Multiplayer and cloud storage in games creates reputation, for instance. This in turn leads to situations where the individual can be exploited by a group or company. We argue that this same pattern can be seen in other social groups and media and offer a tool to understand and combat disinformation and exploitative systems in the future.

Extended Abstract:

Digital gaming is often perceived as a means to gain a fantastical form of power. The idea of a "power fantasy" is extremely common in games advertising and as a description of games in general. In many ways, this description is accurate. Games are often designed to give the player a sense of accomplishment, and many have mechanics that allow them to become extremely powerful relative to their opponents in the game. At the same time, however, this power is indeed a fantasy. Game design is a business, and players of digital games are a resource. This relationship means that there must be mechanics meant to manipulate or at least limit the player from omnipotence. Arcades needing continuing player payments, fighting games needing to have an even playing field, high scores needing to have some sort of social value; these systems need a limit to player power. Still, especially with home gaming systems, the sense of power was relatively strong, players could grind to reach epic levels of damage in Final Fantasy or could cheat to have invincibility in Doom.

As gaming has towards the cloud and "always-on" connectivity, the ability for a player to have that sense of power has decreased as well. Single player games have shifted towards multiplayer realms and there has been a focus on creating a "fair" playing field that is not about power, but instead on maximizing competition (this is particularly true with the rise of e-sports as an industry). Even single player experiences rely on online systems to track things such as achievements, world-wide high scores, or speed-racing times. These mechanisms, either through the intent of the game developer, or by the social relationships that arise through online interaction, have created a situation where the average player experiences a much-diminished level of power in their game experience.

This paper, built from an ethnographic (Boellstorff, et al., 2012) study of the game worlds and players of Clash of Clans, EVE Online, World of Warcraft, Axie Infinity, and Hero Academy 2, looks at the interactions and systems that have led to a gradual decrease in individual agency on the part of the player and a general decrease in importance of the player's power. What it finds is that there are two major paths through which players have experienced a loss of power over time.

In the first path, developers of digital games have purposefully tried to limit the sense of power in their games. With the rise of complexity of games systems, there has been an increase in a sense of fear that cheating would undermine the game-playing experience, making the game unpopular (Consalvo, 2009). Even player mods can cause problems, as seen in the response in media to the "Hot Coffee" mod in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Kerr, 2006). As such, games companies have been more focused on limiting cheating both online and offline. Since there was now a barrier to how much power is available to the player, some game companies found that they can profit by placing additional power behind some sort of paywall system. From "gacha" systems, to lootboxes, to sometimes just open gambling, game companies have been adding additional levels of power behind additional payments (Zendle, 2020). Sometimes called derisively as "Pay to win" games, these systems depend on big spends (called whales) putting large sums of money into the game to gain power over other players in the game (Terranova, 2013; Judmayer, et al., 2019). This type of mentality can be best seen in the development of Axie Infinity, a self-proclaimed "play to earn" game that is built on blockchain and NFT (non-fungible token) technology to create a game where monetary investment allows you to get better creatures and be able to sell them for a profit.

Many of these behaviors above are not meant to be malicious or controlling, they are a response to the existing costs of development and the way that money gets processed to game development companies over time. Strangely, the primary driver of a decrease of individual power is the acceptance of the player that such a thing is necessary. This is not always the case, as severe pushback can occur from a playerbase (Kuchera, 2011), but over time DLC payment have become accepted in most situations. This acceptance leads to a second type of loss of power, one through the social systems that grow around these games. Players who want to succeed on a serious level in Clash of Clans cannot simply play the game in some passive way. The highest clans expect a huge dedication of hours, and sometimes even monetary donations to remain part of the group. This type of social pressure creates a situation where the individual constantly feels like they are indebted to their group for any success, and they need to pay some sort of tithe to be able to participate.

The need to pay one's way into a successful group has become part of many different "hard-core" gaming communities. The top guilds in World of Warcraft, for instance, have very specific requirements of attendance and investment on the part of their players. Even in low-level guilds there is often a requirement to bring one's own consumables (one-time use items such as potions and food) to a raid, and to be at that raid on time (Milik, 2018). Players who don't meet these expectations may well be cut and unable to participate in high-end raiding. In EVE Online, this can be even more serious. Many organizations in EVE use time as a weapon to win wars, so players are often expected to "alarm-clock," or rise at 3 or 4am to catch their opponents off guard

when they attack (Milik, 2016). In accepting these types of interactional controls on individual agency, the gaming world creates an expectation that one's own time and money is not as important as that of the institutional systems around us.

What this means is that games are creating a situation where we want to defend the organization more than we want to protect our own rights – such as players fighting to help a major organization such as Nintendo or Epic Games to hold control of their markets rather than pushing for individual control of their games. Historically seen in the console wars, this set of behaviors also appear in movements such as players of Fortnite being encouraged to boycott Apple as a means to help their favorite game in the "Free Fortnite" ad (Nieborg, 2020).

The type of socialization that is needed to have an individual accept the loss of freedom and individual power within a digital game is very similar to any other organizational or institutional systems (Abrams, 1999). These similarities offer us digital games researchers a unique opportunity to explore the limits of this type of social conditioning on a smaller-scale, and apply the knowledge to greater-world issues, such as cult behavior or the acceptance of propaganda and conspiracy theories.

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