Games Matter

T. L. TAYLOR, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Before Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and all the other platforms that we now umbrella under the term "social media," sites for real-time social interaction via the internet already existed–– computer games. Since its earliest days, online gaming has wrangled with issues around social organization and community formation, harassment and gatekeeping, commercialized publics, and forms of governance and moderation. Those currently interested in thinking critically about these issues would be well served to look at how they have already been navigated and researched for nearly fifty years now in the area of networked play.

Some of the first spaces that allowed users to connect and engage with each other were the early modem-based **bulletin board systems (BBSes)** in the 1980s. While forums and file sharing were a huge part of life in a BBS, the advent of "door games" facilitated real-time play across networks (and geography). These systems allowed a BBS to use an external application to connect users, enabling real-time exploration and interaction with other people in game worlds. Role-playing games made the jump as local BBSes transitioned to the broader internet in the 1990s. This was the heyday of text-based **multiuser dungeons (MUDs)**, where thousands gathered together to create, adventure and build community together. In the 2000s, as computing grew in capacity and dropped in price, and more widely dispersed internet access accelerated, once again gaming proliferated, not just on personal computers but consoles and handheld devices. And in our current moment, with the expansion of gaming onto phones and the rise of services that robustly foster and support play communities (such as YouTube, Twitch, Discord, etc.), gaming has become a mainstream leisure activity across broad demographics.

So why do we so often overlook networked play when we gather to debate the challenges and risks of social media? We should be paying attention to gaming as a site not only of historical import, but as front and center to ongoing considerations around the future of the internet. As

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someone who has studied these communities for over thirty years, I can tell you that gaming is the place to look if you want to see innovative practices and critical issues decades before they hit the mainstream. Gaming has also regularly been the site of fascinating experiments in online community governance, new methods of cultural coproduction, and alternative forms of community management and organization. Our critical inquiries into platforms like Facebook or Twitter will only be strengthened by putting them in conversation with research into gaming spaces. Gaming sites are often bracketed off as "not serious"––though so too are social media. But like social media, gaming is a civic space, a political domain, a media sphere, and a site of critical work. Vital insights that social media companies could learn from––about co-creativity in socio-technical systems, networked engagement, platforms as cultural technologies and thinking beyond retributive justice––can be found in these spaces of play.

CO-CREATIVE SYSTEMS

Many of us who cut our teeth on internet studies researching early text-based worlds in the 1990s sought to carefully attend to both the specificities of the technology and the vibrant communities we were encountering. For me, this meant drawing together a sometimes-messy mix of sociology and science and technology studies to thread the needle of how socio-technical systems actually functioned in the wild. I still recall my excitement at seeing Larry Lessig picking up on Julian Dibbell's amazing work on MUDs, to look at how technology acts as a powerful structuring mechanism.

This is a lesson that was learned well over the ensuing decades––though at moments I sense an almost over-correction, one nearly deterministic in nature. While technologies and infrastructures are powerful actors in our online spaces, they don't actually determine them. They set prompts and defaults, they hail the users, they do some work of structuring action. But people are also adept at reconfiguring platforms for their own purposes, both individual and collective. People and communities are meaning makers, with preferences and aspirations that come into contact with technologies and iteratively shape them in a variety of ways––sometimes in direct opposition to or tension with the aims of developers or platform owners.

In gaming, the smartest developers realized this decades ago, and have long since shifted to iterative development processes that take up user practices, innovations and feedback. Many game companies now watch the creative technical and social innovation of their user communities, and leverage what they observe back into the formal product. Foundational forms of social organization, such as guilds, were actually user innovations first, which developers in turn started designing for. Forms of governance on live streaming services, such as the use of mods, first originated with users and were then picked up and integrated into the next product release. Online spaces are co-creative––generated by complex mixes of human and non-human actors, often with varying stakes and in tension, but always *lived* as a complex circuit of production––and we'd be remiss to overweight either side of the equation.

NETWORKED ENGAGEMENT

The study of gaming also helps remind us that online life is network*ed* life, across many platforms. People and communities construct their experiences through a variety of services, configurations, and third-party systems. Users productively cobble together forms of social action and organization from across sites. This means that attending to online sociality, community and forms of action requires a model of networked engagement. Online life is the work of assemblage.

When we are conceptualizing behavior online, attempting to study it or govern it in practical ways, consideration of a single site or platform in isolation will always be insufficient. Gamers have

long built and governed communities from the bottom up and their preferred forms of play do not stay within a game but regularly leverage third-party forums, audio and visual tools, software mods, and a variety of other "auxiliary" technologies. Attempts to think about policy or interventions that don't understand the flow of meaning, activity, practices, and engagement across sites will always miss how incredibly agile users are at finding ways to support their communities, preferred identities, communication, and experiences.

PLATFORMS ARE CULTURAL TECHNOLOGIES

Underpinning both of these points is a foundational assertion, too often forgotten: that culture is vibrant, iterative, shifting, and collaborative. Imagining you can hand governance off to automated processes fundamentally misunderstands this. Even the best automated systems will never keep up with the innovations of users, because meaning making is at the heart of what we do as humans; we are exceptionally good at understanding context, generating creative interactions and responding to systems. While games increasingly rely on automated systems to enforce a variety of guidelines, savvy developers know the tremendous value of community managers––people who are not simply there to ban trolls, but who are tapped into the flow of activity and help productively engage it, shaping and responding with as much dynamism as users themselves bring.

It's also the case that, once we frame these systems as cultural technologies, understanding what happens on them as a form of cultural participation and expression pops more clearly into focus. In turn, we can more decisively hold these systems accountable. As sites of cultural production and expression, inclusion and exclusion matter profoundly. It is no longer enough to create a space for users to come together; owners bear some responsibility for the culture being produced on their site. Access to them, gatekeeping that keeps people out, structures that recreate bias and stratifications matter profoundly if we see the stakes as seated in cultural participation.

THINKING BEYOND THE BAN HAMMER

Finally, we should be heeding recent calls to think more expansively about platforms, community, and responsibility. Rather than simply leaning on methods like kicking people off a platform or timing them out, more and more discussion is happening in gaming and elsewhere to think beyond the "ban hammer." We need more engagement with the tradition of community management (understanding the ongoing, cultivating nature of working with users), and better understanding of how online spaces might leverage positive socialization and practice restorative, not just retributive, modes of justice.

Looking to more progressive forms of community engagement and moderation takes to heart the co-creative nature of systems and centers an attention to grassroots social innovations, some of which will be ahead of the curve when tackling issues of harassment and exclusion. Thinking beyond the ban hammer means supporting and amplifying communities working to foster better spaces. It means looking toward how forms of proactive socialization offer a powerful site of intervention into behaviors. It means paying attention to the ways communities convey values and norms, watching how people are taught to be a member of a group, including correcting them when they misstep. This is perhaps one of the most challenging lessons because intentionally bad actors take up a huge amount of oxygen and attention. It's easy to simply turn our focus to them––but in doing so we risk sidelining so many who are working hard to create vibrant positive communities online.

FOR GOOD AND FOR ILL

While I have raised a number of key lessons from gaming that I am convinced would be generative for those interested in social media, platforms, infrastructures and governance to engage with, I

want to make a special point to note that none of these *inherently* bend toward the good, the positive, the virtuous. Indeed, part of what has allowed toxic social movements to thrive is an almost intuitive understanding of these lessons by those seeking to produce corrosive communities. If we look at movements like Gamergate, or the later rise of the alt-right and their marshalling of online spaces, we can see how expertise in co-creativity, networked experience, leveraging platforms as cultural technologies, and the power of socialization has profoundly amplified otherwise fringe movements. Ignoring these lessons unfortunately means that, though they are deeply powerful to everyday experiences online, they are being used "for good" far less than they should. Trying to fight toxicity, to create better online lives for us all, without having these dynamics in frame, leaves us fighting with one hand tied behind our backs.

Gaming cannot be set off to the side, a quirky outpost or academic novelty. For many users, it is the *most significant* space where they perform themselves, seek out community, and engage directly in core cultural issues and debates. Game platforms should sit at the heart of our considerations of socio-technical assemblages. It often offers a space for social and technical experimentation well in advance of other domains. It regularly in turn comes to shape and deeply impact mainstream culture and platforms. Games matter, and there is much we can learn from paying careful attention to what is happening in those spaces.

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