Configuring the player: subversive behavior in Project Entropia

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the concept of a "*black box*" as a tool for analyzing virtual worlds. The concept comes from the field of Science & Technology Studies (STS) and we employ it here more specifically to study one such virtual world in particular, *Project Entropia*.

The concept of a "black box" is used to describe the developers' efforts to hide or to build certain assumptions into the very fabric of the virtual world in order to get the players to perform certain prescribed roles. The concept is also used to describe players' efforts to open up this black box in order to get access to and play *other* roles – roles not prescribed by the game publisher and that in some cases function as a threat to the publisher's business model.

The focus of the analysis is on the imperative to "pay to play". This imperative is essential to the developers of the game since Project Entropia does not employ the usual subscription-based revenue model that most other Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) use.

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MICRO PAYMENTS VS. SUBSCRIPTION

Most MMOGs employ a subscription-based business model where players pay a monthly fee, usually between 10 and 15 US$ to get unlimited access to a virtual world. A Swedish company, MindArk, has however set out with a completely different business model. Their software is free to download and usage does not incur any monthly costs. But, you are probably better off if you load up with some local currency – PED – before you start to play. MindArk is not in the charity business and they aim for your wallet, only they have a different way of going at it. For the average player, a visit to Project Entropia's virtual world *Calypso* is bound to set them back in terms of PED (Project Entropia Dollar) but they can always acquire more. The price is however what MindArk charges for their very own homemade currency – currently 1 US$ for 10 PED.

The revenue model of MindArk is consequently a kind of micro payment model. This model opens up a space for players in which they themselves can decide and to some extent "negotiate" how much they think the game is worth. This paper describes the way some players try to sway MindArk's business model in their attempts to circumvent the need to pay for their play and their stay on Calypso.

In contrast to many other MMOGs such as for example *Everquest* [2, 5, 4], not much has been written about Project Entropia beyond a Master's thesis about the legal implications of the game [3].

The results presented here were collected through an ethnographic study conducted among the inhabitants of planet Calypso. The study has been complemented by also looking at Calypso's surroundings, e.g. fan sites and various web forums on the Internet as well as by conducting a survey and follow-up interviews among some experienced Project Entropia players.

BLACK BOXES

Within the field of STS a *black box* is a technology where "the innovator is no longer present, and study of the ordinary user is not very useful because he or she has already taken on board the prescriptions implied in interaction with the machine" [1, p.211]. A black box is a stable technology where the interests of the innovator and the users are "aligned", i.e. they have the same idea of what the technology is and what characterizes proper use of the technology. When the developer and the user have the same view of the goal of the users interaction, "blackboxing" can serve as a way to usher or guide the user as to the correct way of using a technology. In cases where the developer and the user have conflicting interests "blackboxing" is instead a way of limiting and suppressing the user's choices.

One strategy for constructing such a technology is to *literally* build a black box that hides away some of the essential features of the technology from the user. Such features thereby become invisible and impossible to question (or even detect) for the majority of users and the interpretative flexibility of the technology are thereby reduced. Users will thus "buy in" on the developer's idea of what that technology "is" and how it should be used without ever questioning or thinking about alternative ways in which it could have been used (or constructed).

Akrich (ibid.) showed how this process works in her study of a photoelectric lamp kit constructed by French engineers to be used in rural regions of an African country. The lamp kit designers didn't want some of the lamps features to be tampered with and consequently sealed these off so that they couldn't be reached without considerable effort. They also devised non-standard plugs so the lamp kit couldn't be used together with any other electrical products.

In computer games the practice of blackboxing can also be used to make games more challenging. Whereas some game rules are known to the players (such as victory conditions), in open simulations such as Project Entropia, many game rules (governing the game-related interactions) and world rules (governing the simulation as a whole) are hidden from the players. In order to perform well in such games the players have to unravel the hidden rules and algorithms that underlies the game. The purpose of the black box is therefore twofold in a game such as Project Entropia, namely to provide a rewarding game experience and to limit the possible uses of the game. Taylor has also explored an argument similar to ours when she showed how player identities and the shape of the community in a MMOG is constructed through code; which in effect is done through blackboxing [8].

However, arguably the most important purpose of the black box in Project Entropia is in making the players pay for their stay. This is clear in for example the three professions the game offers its players. A player can choose between taking up a position as a hunter, a miner or a crafter. All three professions require certain tools which, of course, cost PED to acquire. The amount of money a player can make in any of the professions is typically less than the costs of the upkeep and repairs of these tools. To state the obvious (however counter-intuitive it may sound), in Project Entropia you have to be willing to pay to work. Although the imperative to "pay to play" is a sort of moral imperative this paper does not make any moral arguments but is only interested in how the players deal with this imperative.

If you choose to take up the hunting profession, it is impossible to damage or for that matter bring down an animal without proper tools; such as a Jester D-1 and some energy packs for ammo. Likewise in mining; to find an ore vein you can't just use your skills in geology and needed equipment cost money (PED).

Instead of the relatively stable method of acquiring the players' money through a subscription rate (which is an effective way of blackboxing the imperative to "pay to play"), Project Entropia has to rely on players' willingness to partake in the available professions. However, even to partake is not good enough. The players must also be willing to spend enough money and not carry out the profession so effectively that MindArk doesn't get an acceptable revenue stream.

MAKING DO

How do the players react when they are confronted with this black box? As Turkle [9] has suggested, when interacting with simulations whose algorithms are unknown to us, most people tend to use the strategy of the "bricoleur". The bricoleur, as described by Lévi-Strauss [7] is someone who has to "make do with 'whatever is at hand' " (p.16). This is initially the strategy used by the players of Project Entropia. The players are limited to the information and tools that that are offered to them by MindArk. However, in Project Entropia, and certainly in other games as well, these tools are put to a very creative use.

One of the few ways to actually make money in Project Entropia without first having to invest any money at all is to use the ability that each player has to “gather sweat” from monsters. Sweat garnered in this way can be sold to other players who use it to construct things and a range of advanced practices has evolved around the activity of gathering sweat.

The monsters on Calypso are not especially bright and they can get stuck when they encounter solid objects. The trees and bushes on Calypso are not solid and let monster pass right through, but houses and other man-made (solid) objects are a different story. Almost all man-made structures are however surrounded by guard towers that keep all monsters away. The two exceptions to this rule are Nymphtown and Camp Phoenix where virtual “sweatfarms” have grown up.

The players have discovered and explored the potential of this situation and lure monsters to these places. After making sure a monster is stuck, the monster can safely be “sweated”. Even the most inexperienced player can earn their first PED in this way without risking getting killed.

The zeal some players display in gathering sweat has forced MindArk to implement limits for how long a player can gather sweat. When the ”sweat gathering ability” has reached a certain level, the player is notified that their avatar can no longer gather sweat. But since it does not cost anything to open a new account, this limit does not stop the most dedicated of players. A determined player can maintain several accounts and let secondary avatars collect sweat on behalf of his/her main avatar.

EXPLORING THE BLACK BOX

To gather sweat is one of the few ways to make do with the limited resources that have been made accessible to the players by the developers. But this tedious practice does not suit everyone. Some players are not satisfied with the tools that are given and they venture to construct new tools to get along. These players are the “scientists” of Project Entropia. Faltin Karlsen [6] discusses a player-initiated ”research program” in the large and sprawling mud ”Discworld”: “We are obviously talking about a somewhat organized research program here. The effort this player makes to explain methodological issues and the shortcomings of his study will be recognized and appreciated by most people having performed empirical research.”

Similar ”research programs” can be observed also in Project Entropia. Some players conduct empirical research and make great efforts to figure out how the algorithms that govern the game-world work.

One of the best examples of this is the ”Ultimate Weapon Chart and Hunt Simulator”; a Windows-based application which in effect is nothing less than a simulation of a simulation. With the help of collected data from hunting trips this tool lets a player estimate the outcome of future hunts, and thereby helps them to optimize their investments. Most of the time this does not mean that the players can actually make money but at least they can make their money last longer.

In order to undertake such ambitious – and potentially subversive – research projects, the players have to abandon the strategy of the bricoleur as the tools needed for these projects are not to be found on Calypso. Instead the players have to partially move their activities to other arenas that are not under the control of MindArk. These players make use of a variety of artifacts to be found *outside* of the game world: calculators, Microsoft Excel and the web to mention a few. Player-created materials for mastering the game are interestingly never referred to as spoilers,

but are seen as essential for a good game experience. This in itself says something about how the players view their participation in the game.

EXPLOITING THE BLACK BOX

Another way to open or hotwire the black box is to cheat. In MMOGs the practice of cheating is often called exploiting, e.g. of somehow taking advantage of weaknesses in the code. There has been numerous exploits in the history of Project Entropia. Some of these have made it possible for a few players to earn great sums of PED with relative ease. These exploits are however often detected by MindArk and player accounts have been closed as a consequence of this. The strategy of the exploiter is not only the most rewarding but also the most dangerous.

All forms of exploits are examples of the technology not performing as intended. The apparently impenetrable black box is found to have holes in its shining matte-black armor. In these cases the written laws (Rules of conduct, EULA), step in and play the role of arbiter. In these cases a certain ambiguity in the laws that govern the world is visible.

ENCLOSING THE BLACK BOX

In order to keep the game functioning and to make sure the players behave "acceptably", the game is updated once per month. These updates both bring new material to the world, new things to discover and new things to buy, as well as implementing new rules when the old rule sets are not working satisfactorily.

Most of these changes are made in order to assure that the players are behaving in an acceptable way from MindArk's perspective, but many changes are also made because of requests from the player base. These changes can be thought of as attempts to close the box after the players have successfully opened it. During the writing of this paper, for example, MindArk finally implemented a more sophisticated AI which makes the strategy of trapping monsters more difficult.

DISCUSSION

The players exert great efforts to open the black box and figure out how it is wired. This is true for Project Entropia as well as for many other games and is evident from the multitude of walkthroughs and strategy guides for any and every computer game. The reward for opening up the black box in Project Entropia is more than just beating the game though. The possibility to actually make money, or at least of not having to pay for playing is another incentive for the players to open the box.

This makes Project Entropia different from most other MMOGs. If we equal playing with gaining an understanding of the game world and of unraveling its hidden algorithms, the play element in Project Entropia is closely linked to forms of subversion. The better the players get at playing the game, the harder MindArk has to make the game in order to keep their income at an "acceptable" level.

Whereas blackboxing in some instances actually is of great help to the users because it guides them to the proper use of a technology, a great part of what makes playing a game fun is attempting to open the black box. Consequently MindArk have made themselves susceptible to a lot of abuse since players of all computer games are often willing to spend a lot of time attempting to open the black box. The roles for the players that are prescribed by the technology are rejected much of the time in favor of alternatives that the players have chosen for themselves. This can

also be observed among the players who just use Project Entropia to socialize with their friends or among those who use it to make feature films – practices which will be explored further in a follow-up paper.

However, there is no doubt that most of the players actually do pay to play and thus that the game, in a certain sense, is sucessful in "configuring the player". Although a lot of effort is exerted in order to get away from paying, the game is continously being balanced through monthly updates to reward those who actually pay for what they get.

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