Gaming DOTA Players: Iterative Platform Design and Capture

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Accounts of gamblification's rise in game design and conversely the gamification of gambling platforms has so far been limited in scope and localized within the purview of one discipline or the other. Gamblification refers to the encroachment of gambling practices and design in non-gambling fields, aided by the legalization of online gambling (Gainsbury et al., 2012). Anthropological accounts have produced rich deconstructions of gambling design in terms of retention (Schull, 2014). On the other end, discussions in game studies have centered on platform governance focused on issues of TOS (Terms of Service) or EULA (End User License Agreement) (Ruch, 2009). However, there remain many areas untouched by analysis of platform ownership, control and engineering across both disciplines.

Furthermore, previous political economic work in game studies has focused on game platforms as immutable objects, wherein analysis apprehends a fixed moment in the evolution of the platform (Nieborg & Helmond, 2018). This has produced a significant gap in research when considering the platforms that underlie games as service, which are marked by continuous innovation and optimization (Ruch, 2009). The question we are concerned with is how can researchers analyze the development of games along a service model, especially as it concerns encroaching platformization? Platformization refers to the process of growth, and assimilation of

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services by digital platforms that scaffold cultural industries, reaching into economic, infrastructural and regulatory domains (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Our object of analysis has been the evolution of the service infrastructure scaffolding Valve's *DOTA 2* (2013). This platform, called *The Battle Pass*, is a seasonal subscription that appends a number of new systems during each summer competitive season of *DOTA 2*. The platform itself offers a number of gamblified minigames, metagoals and trading markets which alter play at a fundamental level. We've conducted long-term ethnographic observation spanning the 2017 and 2018 *Battle Passes*, where we accumulated data that gestures towards an evolving model. We catalogued all mechanics and systems that players are encouraged to explore, with particular focus on reward mechanisms and activity types. Our method included autoethnographic notes and observation of the competitive Esports tournament that crowns the *Battle Pass* season: *The International*.

We argue that the *Battle Pass* is continuously altered in order to optimize player retention each time it is updated. The concept of player retention produces an interesting avenue in which to consider iterative design of digital platforms previously siloed in gambling studies. We also argue that the ultimate goal of these shifts is to achieve a form of absolute player retention, a modified notion of "infrastructural capture" in the sense that integrating the game community requires participation in the platform's data collection and commodification mechanisms and seeks to engineer player actions (Nechustai, 2016). Utilizing Consalvo and Dutton's toolkit for game analysis, particularly the interaction map and user interface, we have drawn up schemas for each yearly platform (2006). We tie our analysis to a broader discussion about optimization of platforms that is experimented with yearly in order to produce the most frictionless system (Flew, 2009). We consider the end-goal of this optimization to be a lean product platform that extracts the most value out of consumers (Srnicek, 2016). This allowed us to develop a conceptual modeling tool that will help game researchers to visualize long-term shifts in these platforms.

More specifically, we discuss how the gamblified game systems of 2017 were added in order to increase player investment and retention. Further, we then show which systems were rolled back the following year and what other systems were rolled out to further increase player retention, while experimenting with laborious play orientations at the same time. Our contribution is extending the interaction map and user interface analysis tools into longitudinal methods for analyzing games. We have also combined this methodological approach with established value-centric analyses models promoted in *Values at Play* (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Understanding that games as service exist more as a trajectory than a fixed snapshot allows researchers to discern what the orientation of design is and how reading the evolution of a service over many years can account for future changes in a game's model.

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