

Commoditization of Helping Players Play: Rise of the Service Paradigm

Jaakko Stenros

University of Tampere

Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 University of Tampere
jaakko.stenros@uta.fi

Olli Sotamaa

University of Tampere

Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 University of Tampere
olli.sotamaa@uta.fi

ABSTRACT

The paper provides a cultural and economic background for the rise of the service paradigm in the realm of games. Both the complicated relation between products and services and a variety of contemporary examples are examined in order to develop a detailed understanding of the ecology of games-related services. From mapping the current situation we move on to create a particular player service model. The model is created both to help analytically dissect what player services are and to pinpoint some blind spots in current service design. The model can be further used to rethink the current industry ecology and to potentially find entirely new semi-independent service domains.

Author Keywords

Games as services, player service model, game industry, commoditization

INTRODUCTION

The recent couple of years have witnessed an increasing focus on games as services in the games industry. A variety of phenomena from persistent game worlds and micro-transactions to content updates and player-created content have inspired industry representatives to pronounce the rise of games-related service business.¹ The emphasis on services is not limited to the eloquent rhetoric. At the same time the game industry has introduced a variety of subscription based business models, digital distribution systems and other innovations that make games, more or less, available “as services”. However, academia has thus far mostly stayed silent on the matter.² It is also symptomatic that the emergence of service design thinking

¹ For example *Understanding Free to Play: Nexon's Min Kim speaks out* at <http://tinyurl.com/5jmdv6>, *Getting Interactive* at <http://tinyurl.com/d4qc2c>, *Y Control: Joe Ybarra On Cheyenne Mountain's Massive Plans* at <http://tinyurl.com/crmwdr> and *LittleBigPlanet: It's a "service" as much as a game* at <http://tinyurl.com/czxrue>

² The few contributions that discuss game services mostly focus on the technical service infrastructure for online games.

[10] is seldom discussed in the current game design literature. Developing a detailed understanding of the broad scope of games-related services is challenging for several reasons. Service is an ambiguous and slippery term and in relation to games it is used in a variety of contexts. The lack of theoretical literature also complicates the objective.

In this paper we provide a cultural and economic background for the service-centered thinking. Contemporary examples are examined to shed light on the service-driven game paradigm. The complicated relation of products and services is further discussed from different perspectives. From mapping the existing conceptions we move on to bring clarity to the gamut of player services. A player service model is created to help dissect analytically what player services are, but also to help design a better user experience by pinpointing possible services that one might add to a portfolio. The model is meant to be pragmatic and inspirational rather than dogmatic. It is created from the point of view of the player, not the games industry, and we hope that this fresh angle can shed light on the anatomy of game related services that traditional economics-based models render invisible. The service paradigm currently dominant in the games industry has been built on the idea of games as commodities; viewing games instead as *activities* opens a whole new (service) design space and sharpens our understanding of the expanded play experience.

THE EMERGENCE OF SERVICE-DRIVEN PARADIGM

In their critical analysis of the global game industry Kline et al. describe digital games as the ideal commodity of post-Fordism [11]. They argue that digital games bring together the most important production techniques, marketing strategies, and cultural practices of an era: The production of games, characterized both by its reliance on networked computer technologies and its youthful and precarious workforce, typifies the new entrepreneurial regime. At the same time the digital game exemplifies post-Fordism's tendency to fill the everyday life of consumers with fluidified, experiential, and digital commodities.

The intangible and experiential nature of post-Fordist commodities has inspired theorists to ponder the

Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009

© 2009 Authors & Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

increasingly fluid border between goods and services. As economist Jeremy Rifkin puts it: “As goods become more information-intensive and interactive and are continually upgraded, they change character. They lose their status as products and metamorphose into evolving services.” [19] Many examples of this development can already be identified in the different sectors of game industry. Scholarly accounts on the relation of games and services are, however, rare. This is partly connected to the more general lack of service theorization.³ Therefore, we need to shed light to the historical context of this change.

From activities to products and finally to services

Traditionally games have been anonymously designed and in the public domain. They have spread as folk lore and evolved over time. Historically games have often been played with pieces crafted by the players themselves. Proprietary board games first appeared in the eighteenth century, major games companies (such as Parker Brothers and Ravensburger) arose in the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth century proprietary games grew to rival traditional ones. [17]

The slow shift from traditional to proprietary games both heralded the rise of the designer and introduced the idea of game as a *product*. Traditional games were not supposed to make money and they were not owned as intellectual property by anyone. As this started to change selling games became an industry – and the constant need for new games arose. The traditional way of viewing playing games as an activity was challenged by the market-inspired way of seeing them as products to be sold.

From the 1970's onwards, it became more common to treat games as products. This was related to adopting strategies from more established branches of popular culture: New versions of popular games were published, the concept of a game sequel was introduced, expansions to existing games were sold, and branding and tie-ins to existing intellectual properties became more popular. While pinball machines, other arcade games and some board games may have pioneered many of the methods, it was digital games and to some extent role-playing games that lead the way.⁴

³ Chesbrough & Spohrer, probably the most visible proponents of “services science”, argue that while the services sector has in the past few decades grown to dominate economic activity in the advanced (western) economies, the academic understanding of services remains rudimentary. [5]

⁴ It is worth noting that though games have been sold as products for some time now, the way they are played – game playing as an activity – is still much more open than the economic model suggests. For example modding is as old as digital games [14, 21] and board games continue to have house rules. Indeed, Partlett notes that the shift in board games from traditional to proprietary coincides with a

Sequential digital games importantly exemplify many of the consequences of commoditization. Today the production of game sequels and exploitation of licensed IP are unquestionably central to the industry.⁵ Sequels build on the story (or story-world) of the original game, offer a new version of the rules, or both. Expansion packs are similar to sequels as they tend to expand the story-world of the game and bring in new systemic elements. The so called episodic games form the latest adaptation of so called “branched serialization” . The idea is that each installment contains a limited amount of gameplay storywise. Though these episodes can be played individually – there is no original self-sustained game that they augment – they are designed to be played in order. The popularity of game franchises, sequels, expansion packs and episodes highlights that the products sold need not be self-sustained games – which bring us to our main theme: the role of services in contemporary gaming.

As already discussed above, a new shift has recently taken place primarily in the realm of digital games: Games are being viewed not only as activities or products but also as *services*. For example in the case of episodic game content the business logic is unmistakable: Instead of selling a game to the player once, why not create a continuous relationship where the player pays a fee at regular intervals. This subscription fee entitles her to receive a new “expansion pack” regularly. However, it seems that (at least at the current phase) the game product stays pretty much the same.⁶ What changes is the way the product is distributed – and the way it is experienced.

For example *Sam & Max Season One*, a six part series of downloadable game episodes, was available for the customers of Game Tap from the fall of 2006 to the spring of 2007. Later the content was available in a boxed release as a DVD. *Wing Commander: Secret Ops* was first released over the internet for free and later available as part of the *Wing Commander: Prophecy Gold* retail package. In both

shift in emphasis of the play as an activity away from the board towards the circle of players exemplified by quiz games such as *Trivial Pursuit* and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. [17]

⁵ According to the Entertainment Software Association's (ESA) sales charts, out of the twenty best selling video game titles (console games) in the year 2007 no less than 18 were either licensed, sequels or remakes (*Wii Play* and *Assassin's Creed* being the exceptions). Out of the top 20 computer game titles (PC games) only *Bioshock* can be considered to be based on original IP. No fewer than six of the twenty titles are expansion packs and thus can not be played without the original game they augment. [7]

⁶ It is worth noting that the digital distribution based business models have, however, made the development of more small-scale game projects economically viable.

of these cases there is a product, a game, that the consumer purchases. What varies is the way that content is delivered and how it is consumed. A comparison can be made to television: the content of a television show stays the same whether one watches it once a week from broadcast or in one session from a DVD box – but the experience is hardly the same.⁷

There are some games that a player cannot play without a service from the manufacturer. *World of Warcraft* is a game where the player purchases the game (and two possible expansion packs) for a set price, but in addition, she needs to pay a monthly service fee to be able to access the servers where playing takes place. In a *World of Warcraft*-like MMO *GuildWars*, the player pays for game packages, but not for access to the servers (though that access is still needed to play).⁸ Still, it is debatable if games themselves have changed, or if it is simply the marketing of games that has undergone a shift.

Ludic System as a Platform for Fiction

The evolution of the commercial game product from a stand-alone game to an updatable product to a self-updating product seems very natural. However, a closer look to what exactly is updated and expanded reveals that the emphasis is not so much on the ludic system, but on the fiction of the game. The added emphasis on the role of story-worlds in games ties into the commoditization process of the last century. As games became commodities they evolved from systems to include fiction [9]. Perhaps coming up with new game mechanics and systems is more difficult than just superimposing a new story-world on an existing system. Branding an old game with thematic content (for example *Star Trek Chess*) does not really require a story-world, but “new” games created around the idea of spin-off merchandise often use story-world to disguise the fact that the underlying game system is recycled.

In regards to digital games, David Myers has argued that for many games the fiction becomes irrelevant over time. Though the fiction of the game is relevant for players when they begin playing, these meanings vanish over time as the “signs become disassociated from their real-life referents and more definitively associated with their roles and relationships within the context of the game interface, interaction, and rules.” [15]. Myers used *Spacewar!* as an

example, but a first-person shooter might be a more apt example today.⁹

This does not mean that for many games the fiction is not an integral part of the game, but that once the story content has been consumed its meaning to the player is diminished. Creating games where new story content is constantly available seems like a perfect solution. In a way the game system becomes a *platform* for stories and other player activities.

As Kücklich argues the narrative dimension of digital games has always been tied to the commodity form. Early arcade games did not have an end as the economic model was based on players inserting quarter after quarter, whereas console games had to introduce a narrative closure to make consumers purchase a new game. [13] The closure of a story – the finite nature of fiction, if you will – also gave birth to the sequel and the expansion. The expansions can both extend the existing narrative and reveal new parts of the game world. Selling games through a particular *service relationship* and charging monthly fees for the opportunity to play seems like the logical conclusion of the serialization of games that started when fiction was married with system to create sales.

Games through a Service Relationship

In order to understand what a service is or can be in relation to games, it is helpful to take a step back and shortly ponder the various interpretations of the term. Depending on the context the word can refer to an industry branch, to a certain group of professions, or to particular “service products”. According to Merriam Webster online dictionary service is “a helpful act” (“the act of serving”) or “useful labor that does not produce a tangible commodity”. In economic jargon services refer to those activities that are neither products nor construction. Services are often characterized as intangible and insubstantial, as they cannot be handled, heard, tasted or smelled. They cannot be stored or transported and they are inseparable and perishable.

One of the consequences of the recent emphasis on services is that “instead of thinking of products as fixed items with set features and a one-time sales value, companies now think of them as ‘platforms’ for all sorts of upgrades and value-added services” [19]. Several examples from the games sector indicate that this development has already had an impact on the game industry rationale. Recent examples include *Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and Damned*, the

⁷ This paper concentrates on player services. For a compatible model on the expanded game experience, see [12].

⁸ Note that MMOs are not the only type of games that tie a product into a service: for example alternate reality games such as *Majestic* also require an active service element [23]. On the other hand, MUDs show that hosting the server need not necessarily be handled by a corporation.

⁹ Myers was primarily talking about an individual player, but when the process happens culturally, a game is stripped of its fiction and reduced to its system. This has happened to *chess* and arguable it is happening to *Monopoly* as an increasing amount of various thematic *Star Wars* and *Simpsons Monopolies* appear to seemingly recontextualize the gameplay when in fact they are exposing it to anyone who plays more than one version.

episodic expansion pack for the *Grand Theft Auto IV* game that provides several hours of new adventures in the Liberty City for Xbox360 owners. The expansion, published in February 2009, costs approximately one third of the price of the original game. Another well recognized example is the racing game *Burnout Paradise*. The game was first published in the early 2008. Since then both several free updates and downloadable packs have been made available and the game itself has undergone a notable change. In the early 2009, the game was re-released with all the new content as *The Burnout Paradise Ultimate Box*.

As discussed, expansions have for long been typical in role-playing games, collectible card games, and lately also in board games and digital games. In the PC games industry expansion packs as specific mode of branched serialization have become a popular way to exploit existing intellectual property and to expand the life span of a game. Console game expansions are also becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly due to the proprietary online services like Xbox Live and PlayStation Network. Currently various kinds of add-ons from map packs and team packs to skin packs are already provided via these services.

Business-wise the objective behind the different kinds of upgrades and add-ons is to create a long-term service relationship with the customer. Subscription-based game services have a very similar aim. The success of subscription-based models – utilized for example in MMOs, online distribution services like Steam or Gametap or value-added services like Xbox Live (Live Gold Membership) – indicate that players are willing to create a long-term relationships with the service providers once the service provided is both attractive and accessible. As Rifkin argues present-day customers may no more seek so much the ownership of material good but they are buying access to segments of experience [19]. This seems to be increasingly the case with digital games as most players are not primarily interested in the plastic and cardboard but they rather buy the right to experience the challenges designed to the virtual game world. Pine and Gilmore have discussed experience economy as the next step after service economy:

An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable. [18]

Yet it seems unlikely that this stage can be achieved without a thorough understanding of one of its central building blocks, services.¹⁰

The server-dependent technological structure behind the subscription based models has in the past few years made

¹⁰ For a discussion on the design and facilitation of pervasive game experiences as services, see [22].

the breakthrough and is there to stay. The server-centered model has not only produced a unique chargeable commodity but it also makes it possible to mostly avoid traditional forms of piracy and limit the second hand market of game titles. Thus, from the point of view of economics the situation seems rather clear-cut: games that are sold “as services”, paid for incrementally or cyclically, and games that require the consumer to repeatedly be in contact with the seller can be easily construed as services.¹¹ However, this point of view does not pay much attention to the objects that are sold; *what* is being sold is not as important as *how* the sale takes place. The understanding of “service” is fairly limited. By reducing service to a digital sales channel through which products and add-ons are sold, it blinds itself to play as an activity and the “useful labor that does not produce a tangible commodity” that the players are interested in. Instead of viewing games as products and services, looking at them as activities, or rather, as a platform for activities, yields new insights.

In the following we move on and approach the service dilemma from the angle of players. We argue that the transition from game products to services is not primarily based on the changes in the very artifact. The emergence of the service-paradigm does not so much represent a change in the nature of the game itself – both as an abstract system and an activity – but more in the expedients of bringing them to the players. Thus, rather than considering games bluntly “as services” we rather suggest that contemporary games are often both based on and provide a basis for various kinds of services.

PLAYER SERVICE MODEL

In this paper player services are divided into five major categories. These categories are maintenance of environment, support of initiation, facilitation of playing, assistance of play and socialization of player (see Figure 1). It is interesting to note that the categories correspond with what is often perceived as the core of services in other industries. For example Anderson and Narus explain the spectrum of supplementary services as follows:

By services, we mean much more than technical problem solving, equipment installation, training, and maintenance. We also are talking about programs that help customers to design their products or reduce their costs as well as rebates or bonuses that influence how customers do business with a supplier. And we also include systems such as logistics management; electronic data interchange for placing orders and

¹¹ The dominance of technological terminology has also shaped the way services are perceived in the games sector. Servers, web services and other lingo relating to computation architecture is not entirely compatible with the way services are conceived of in this paper. For an example, see [8].

tracking their status; and expert systems that figure out, for example, which materials can deliver desired functional performance to customers. [1]

In the games industry it seems that the latter services are much better understood than the core. This model seeks to help with that. All of these player services identified here are activities that support playing. The first three service types are available for a player (or a potential player) during the process of deciding to play and progressing to actually playing: They make playing possible in a given environment, lower the threshold of initiating play and facilitate the actual process of playing. The last two are transformative services relevant for the act of playing, they help the player play the way she wants – either by teaching the player to play better or by changing the game to fit the player’s wants and needs.



Figure 1: Player service categories

In this model no distinction is made between playful paideic activities and structured ludic games (see [4]). Staging a children’s party at a fast food restaurant, facilitating bungee jumping or tandem parachuting, hosting a karaoke night, or providing erotic role-play scenarios all count as player services just as hosting an online world, teaching how to serve better in tennis or recommending a game a user might like based on her past purchases. Additionally, these service types apply both in physical space as well as in digital environments. And finally, a transaction of money is not seen as a necessary criterion for a service: many player services are provided on a player-to-player basis for free.¹²

The model was created in an iterative process of analyzing features and processes of games and play. The research

¹² Sometimes it can be difficult to differentiate between the provider and the adopter. According to [5] services are characterized by “a negotiated exchange between a provider and an adopter (supplier and customer) for the provision of (predominantly) intangible assets” Furthermore, the adopter (customer) is these days often seen as “a co-producer, intimately involved in defining, shaping, and integrating the service” (ibid.).

process has followed a particular hermeneutical circle by bringing together both top-down and bottom-up approaches. By learning more about the details and example cases we have been able to acquire a better conception of the whole, which in turn has provided a deeper understanding of each particular case.

Maintenance of Environment

Play happens in a context. This context can be physical or digital, public or private, unique or mass-produced, etc., but in order for the play to be possible, the environment must meet certain requirements. What these requirements are varies from one game to another, but most games require a certain kind of space. Playing ice hockey requires a flat frozen field, online games require servers to run the code (as well as all kinds of administration) and playful activities on social networking sites are not possible without the platform. The space can be physical, virtual or mediated depending on the needs of the game. Environment maintenance refers to the actions that make playing possible, to the actions that provide a practical setting for the ludic structures of play, to providing a platform for play.

Maintenance and administration of the play environment means, for example, keeping all the game devices at an arcade or a casino functioning correctly. It means looking after the rides at an amusement park and cutting the grass on a golf course. It also includes actions such as maintenance of virtual worlds where play takes place such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, but also networking sites that provide access to games and playing fields such as *Facebook*.

A concrete example of active maintenance of an environment can be found from *Second Life* where the administrators need to control so called *gray goo*. In *Second Life*, it is possible for the users to create new items and functionalities in the virtual world. Gray goo is term that refers to self-replicating objects that, if left unchecked, will fill the whole virtual world. The service was attacked with gray goo in November 2006 and the world simulator had to be shut down momentarily to deal with the problem.¹³

Drawing the line between administration and maintenance that is related and is not related to the support of ludic actions is tricky. Online game services need accounting and arcade floors need wiping; though the play environment would not be available without these actions, it would be ludicrous to call them player services.

¹³ See *Second Life Hit by Massive In-Game Worm* at <http://it.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=06/11/20/0218221&from=rss> and *Gray goo attacks Second Life* at <http://www.joystiq.com/2006/11/20/grey-goo-attacks-second-life/>

Support of Initiation

Before playing can happen, one must choose to play and choose the game. This is where the service of play initiation support comes in: Offering games as an activity option, supporting the decision to start playing a game, providing games to choose from, aid in picking content, helping find playmates. Initiation support also means providing physical and mental accessibility to games.

In practice initiation support means informing a potential player of the choices available to him (from *Facebook* to *Steam*), but also keeping a potential player updated on what her friends are playing (through services like *Raptr*). It also means the presentation of catalogue at game service sites ranging from *Playstation Store* and *Gametap* to *Popcap Games* and *N-Gage Arena*. Recommendation systems based on past purchases (or patterns of play), such as the ones used on Amazon for books and on Netflix for films would also be a clear example of a service where a potential player is supported in her choice of activity. Digital distribution is also a part of this group of services.

Naturally, the initiation support is not limited to the digital realm. A familiar clerk in a game store who knows your taste in games can help pick a game you are likely to enjoy. The placement of games and rides in arcades, casinos and amusement parks also helps a player find what she is looking for – and helps the migration from one game to another. Even the positioning of a lonesome slot machine in the corner of a gas station falls into this category.

Facilitation of Playing

Some games must be facilitated so that they can be played. Facilitating play is a service where a game is staged based on existing content or form. This can mean game mastering a session, administering an experience or running a packaged game.

Hosting a murder dinner¹⁴ based on a ready-made scenario is an archetypical example of facilitating play. Again, it is important to note that money does not need to change hands, as it is possible to provide services for free. So hosting a murder mystery for friends or game mastering a role-playing game based on a ready-made scenario, both count as facilitation of play.

This category also entails activities where a person participates in game play, but they do not do this primarily as a player, such as dealers, croupiers, referees, and online game masters. These people are required for the play to take place, but they are not (only) playing themselves. Similarly, leading play at a children's party, organizing raids in MMOs and setting up FPS tournaments are also facilitation services.

Assistance of Play

Once play commences, or is about to commence, the players may want to fine-tune their experience. This might mean tweaking the rules, or changing the difficulty level, but in essence play aid is about providing support for the act of playing, for different styles of playing and controlling playing. The aim is to modify the game to suit the needs and wants of the exact people, who are playing it, thus personalizing or localizing it.

Digital games have widened the array of play aids. Most games ship with multiple difficulty levels the player can choose between. In addition to these, there are numerous walkthroughs, game wikis, additional programs and plugins available for the popular games. While majority of these services may be provided by other players this is notably an area in which the so called paratextual industries are highly visible. Consalvo explicates how games spawn various secondary industries – ranging from gaming magazines and strategy guide publishers to mod chip makers [6]. The products of these industries have an important role as they help players to further customize their experiences.

In addition to the services that do not directly alter the game, there are the ones that do: mods, hacks and patches. These additions and alterations can be developer-made or player-made. While a minority of players is involved in developing modifications, they can have an influence on the experiences of large player populations. Modifications also remind us of the fact that players have throughout the history bent and transformed game systems into new shapes [21]. In case of non-digital games most of the issues mentioned above can be dealt with by applying house rules. Alternate rules are much easier to implement when the game system is operated by the players than when they are coded.

It is also possible to outsource parts of playing. Usually these are parts that are deemed uninteresting and tedious. In online role-playing games this has resulted in a shadow economy that provides services that the game publisher does not condone such as gold farming and sales of high level characters (see for example [3]). Again, there are also precedents in the non-digital world: ball boys in tennis and caddies in golf let the player concentrate on what is perceived as the core of gameplay.

Finally, the aid to control when not to play is also a service in this category. Parental controls, different kinds of time limits and the like are all player services assisting play.

Socialization of Player

The final category of game related services is teaching play and socialization of a player: Training or teaching a player to play a game, or to play better, to teach the player the relevant playing culture, to provide the player with an outlet where she can reflect on playing, and help her manage or

¹⁴ See for example <http://www.dinnerandmurder.com/>

develop her player identity.¹⁵ This varies from providing official rules to tutorials and to full scale teaching with rehearsals. Also, providing a forum where players can discuss the game and reflect on it can be seen as a part of the socializing process – and a site where more experienced players will become teachers themselves.

This type of service is an industry in itself: there are countless tutors and instructors teaching golf, tennis, skiing, yoga, and every other conceivable sport. There are personal trainers and coaches helping people become better at their chosen field. Extensive training services are not only limited to non-digital sports; e-sports have their own trainers as well.

Still, in the digital realm most of these functions have been automated: most games ship with a tutorial mode that teaches the player how to play the game. Some games, such as *Halo 3*, also provide hints and tips when it seems that a player is stuck. Yet teachers are also present in virtual worlds: some experienced players make it their business to see that new players get a handle on the game play.

DISCUSSION

The five service types presented provide a practical way of dividing the pie of game related services. It clearly communicates that viewing service simply as a relationship between the provider and the player, as a pipeline through which to sell products, hinders gaining a more comprehensive view of the possibilities provided by the service paradigm. The implication is that players crave a wider spectrum of services, not just digitally distributed game content. It seems that service-driven business models adopted by the game industry thus far cover only a small portion of the possibilities.

Province of the Model

The player service typology introduced here has certain limitations. The lines between different categories are often blurry: Does explaining the rules of a game count as initiation support or as socialization? Does a caddie in golf facilitate play, or does she provide a play aid service? In this regard, the five categories are not mutually exclusive but rather represent five different angles on the construction of the activity of play.

As discussed, the player service model also relies on the idea that the *game itself is not seen as a service*. Yet one cannot deny the fact that games can be used to fulfill certain needs, to smuggle certain type of content, to provide certain “helpful acts” – to provide services. In this respect, the model presented above applies to games that are played – for the lack of a better word – for fun. When playing the game is a *paratelic* [2] or an *autotelic* [20] activity,

¹⁵ Online services like *Raptr*, *MyGamerCard* and *GameStrata* exemplify existing online services that help players to manage their player identities.

basically an activity that one engages for its own purpose, then there is not much point in looking at them as services. However, games that are played for *telic* reasons [2] can benefit from being considered services. If a game is played in order to learn, to understand a political message, to encounter an artistic agenda, or to fill a clearly defined function (such as stimulate memory, enhance cognitive capabilities, even fall asleep), then the player engages in the playing for an external purpose. The act of playing is done in service of some other, external, need. Partly this is simply linguistic posturing and hair-splitting. Telic games are still products and often the service is to provide access to them. However, the design process and customization of telic games seems more prominent than in autotelic games as the purpose of the product is not (just) to create an experience of fun, but to fulfill some other, often more specific need or function.

Finally, the model does not differentiate between digital and non-digital play. This is a conscious analytical choice; the aim is to make the similarities visible. Looking for precedents in the non-digital world can help avoid inventing the wheel again. The downside is that the very real differences between digital and non-digital services are mostly rendered invisible. For example, it is possible to argue that digital games have a rather unique way of being used as platforms for other activities (such as creating machinima). These kinds of activities, if they indeed are services, do not comfortably fit in the model.¹⁶ More importantly most digital games are based on screens of various kinds and one could most probably specify some of the service characteristics of the particularly screen-based gaming. A larger analysis would, however, require some more elaboration and will therefore be left to the future contributions.

Digital games further underline the need for a more clearly defined understanding of what a game (or play) is. If a game is seen as an abstract system, then any presentation of the game can be construed as facilitation. Similarly, just as it can be argued that in a digital game the code facilitates play, it can be said that digital games assists the style of play by handling menial tasks.

Implications for the Industry

The player service model reveals the variety of forms a service aimed at players can take. It shows that while games may not be services as such, there is a plethora of game-related needs players have that the game industry can fulfill. Some of the services identified in our model are produced in-house or outsourced to subcontractors. Yet providing

¹⁶ It is, however, easy to come up with parallels in the non-digital world: Using role-playing games to craft stories for books (as Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman did with *Dungeons & Dragons* to help create *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*), soccer team as a social network.

other, additional services can provide a basis for complementary businesses of their own. In this respect, our model can be used to rethink the current situation and to potentially find entirely new semi-independent service domains.

This support ecology reveals services that the game publishers have so far not seen fit to provide. For example there is a wide variety of assistance of play services that are provided by other players underlining the want and need for such services. The game industry seems reluctant to surrender control over how playing takes place to the degree wanted by the users. This has created a niche for hacks, mods and remixes, but also a shadow economy for selling gold on virtual worlds.

One of the most often mentioned benefits of digital distribution is the chance to “cut out the middle man”, meaning that developers can improve their shares by simplifying the value chain. In some cases it can be highly beneficial for developers to free themselves from the control of retailers and publishers. Other times the situation may, however, not be that simple. In free games or advertising-based business models the ecology of related parties is very different from the simple relation between buyers and sellers. Additional services – and thus additional value – provide an opportunity for other actors in the field.

One of the benefits of digital distribution is that the developers will have much more information available concerning their customers. While in the traditional retail model developers often have very little information on the people who play their games, online services can provide detailed data on the buying habits and play behavior of customers. Feedback from players allows developers to serve the player needs more quickly and precisely. Constant communication between developers and players provides other kinds of options as well. Various player-involving strategies from focus groups and playtesting to supporting different forms of player created content indicate that game industry has already absorbed many important features on the way to becoming a full-blown service business. Business models that rely on player created content necessitate a variety of services for player-creators. For example better supporting socialization of players is something game companies need to learn to do better (e.g. providing the production tools for maintaining the community forums, creating tutorials).

Coda

In his analysis of product-to-service transition Rifkin argues:

Instead of commodifying places and things and exchanging them in the market, we now secure access to one another's time and expertise and borrow what we need, treating each thing as an activity or event that we purchase for a limited period of time. Capitalism is

shedding its material origins and increasingly becoming a temporal affair. [19]

If this is indeed the case, then subscription-based models that alter the focus from traditional ownership into readily chargeable access to game worlds (maintenance and facilitation in our terms) is probably the most visible example of this development within game business.¹⁷ Increasing focus on the temporal aspects of play can challenge the traditional thinking of what are the actual player needs that should be served and what kind of services provide a basis for viable businesses. Viewing games not as commodities, but as an activity of playing is compatible with this view of temporality. The provocative stance our model takes on services can hopefully provide fresh ideas also in relation to these questions.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, J.C. & Narus, J.A. “Capturing the Value of Supplementary Services.” in *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 73, no.1 (January-February 1995), pp. 75-83.
2. Apter, M. J. “A Structural-Phenomenology of Play.” in Kerr, J. H. & Apter, M. J. (eds.) *Adult Play. A Reversal Theory Approach*. Swets & Zeitlinger, Amsterdam, 1991.
3. Castranova, E. “Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier”, in *The Gruter Institute Working Papers on Law, Economics, and Evolutionary Biology*, Vol. 2 (2001). Available: <http://www.bepress.com/giwp/default/vol2/iss1/art1>
4. Caillois, R. *Man, Play and Games*. Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., New York, 1961.
5. Chesbrough, H., & Spohrer, J. “A Research Manifesto for Services Science”. *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 49 (2006), no. 7, pp. 35-40.
6. Consalvo, M. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. MIT Press. Cambridge (Mass.) & London, 2007.
7. ESA (2008) *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Available: http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2008.pdf
8. Foster, I. & Kesselman, C. *The Grid 2: Blueprint for the New Computing Infrastructure*. Morgan Kaufman, San Francisco, 2004.
9. Juul, J. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) & London, 2005.
10. Kimbell, L & Seidel, V. (eds.) *Designing for Services - Multidisciplinary Perspectives: Proceedings from the*

¹⁷ Popular advertising-based models provide a bit different perspective to the development as it is the time the players spend with the game that is sold to advertisers.

Exploratory Project on Designing for Services in Science and Technology-based Enterprises. University of Oxford, Saïd Business School, Oxford, 2008.

11. Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & Peuter, G. D. (eds.). *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2003.

12. Kultima, A. "Model for expanded game experiences", presented at *Playful Experiences Seminar*, April 2-3, 2009, University of Tampere (Finland).

13. Kücklich, J. (forthcoming) "Insert Credit to Continue. Narrative and Commodity Form in Video Games" in Sorg J. & Venus, J. *Erzählformen im Computerspiel. Zur Medienmorphologie digitaler Spiele*. Available: <http://playability.de/pub/drafts/credit.pdf>

14. Laukkanen, T. *Modding Scenes: Introduction to User-Created Content in Computer Gaming*, Hypermedia Laboratory Net Series, 9. University of Tampere, Tampere, 2005. Available: <http://tampub.uta.fi/tup/951-44-6448-6.pdf>

15. Myers, D. "The Anti-Poetic: Interactivity, Immersion, and Other Semiotic Functions of Digital Play", presented at *COSIGN-2004*, September 14–16, 2004, University of Split (Croatia)

16. Nieborg, D. "The expansion pack economy", paper presented at *Media Change and Social Theory: The Second Annual ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural*

Change Conference, University of Oxford, UK (6–8 September 2006).

17. Parlett, D. *The Oxford History of Board Games*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

18. Pine II, B.J. & Gilmore, J.H. "Welcome to the Experience Economy." in *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 76, no. 4 (July-August 1998), pp. 97-105.

19. Rifkin, J. "When Markets Give Way to Networks ... Everything is A Service" in J. Hartley (ed.), *Creative Industries*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford & Carlton, 2005, pp. 361-374.

20. Salen, K., and Zimmerman, E. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) & London, 2004.

21. Sotamaa, O. "Creative User-centred Design Practices: Lessons from Game Cultures", in L. Haddon et al. (eds.), *Everyday Innovators: Researching The Role of Users in Shaping ICTs*. Springer Verlag, London, 2005, pp. 104-116.

22. Söderlund, T., Svahn, M. & Ghellal, S. *IPerG Deliverable D4.2: Business and Revenue Models*, 2005. Available: <http://www.pervasive-gaming.org/Deliverables/D4.2-Business-Revenue-Models.pdf>

23. Taylor, T.L. & Kolko, B.E. "Boundary Spaces: Majestic and the Uncertain Status of Knowledge, Community and Self in a Digital Age". *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 6 (2003), no. 4, pp. 497-522.