

What Keeps Designers and Players Apart? Thinking How an Online Game World is Shared.

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ABSTRACT

Considering both play and design as world building activities, this paper offers to think the question of the distribution of authority on online game worlds through a sociotechnical perspective, and investigate the paradoxical relationship between designers and players of an online roleplaying game universe. The analysis is grounded on long-term investigations led on the project of an online multiplayer role playing game universe. This material allows to describe and question the complex *agencement* of mediations which keep apart design and play activities in the building of the game world.

Keywords

MMOG, design and use, mediations, agencement. social worlds, community management.

INTRODUCTION

“Yet the central organization does not have total control. Groups of players may change the rules. Participants come to feel that they own the game, and this claim may create friction with those who maintain the legal and economic rights. The individual player’s freedom of expression conflicts with the reality that the proper way of playing was decided by others and was formalized through a set of rules.” – G.A. Fine, 1989

Players do participate in the building of game worlds. The players’ shared creativity and productivity have been investigated for years as one of the firsts “online” social game phenomena (Au 2002; Kücklich 2005; Sotamaa 2010). Online game universes have brought this issue one step beyond, as most of them were meant to provide a virtual, compelling world to their subscribers. Also, JC Herz wrote in 2002 about *Star Wars Galaxy* : “Players are a constituency, not just an audience. The designers, far from being authors, are more like local politicians. The audience doesn’t just watch the story. The audience is the story. The players are producing as much as they’re consuming - perhaps more” (Herz 2002). Virtual worlds then were allowed to join, at least for a short time, a broader debate around new media uses and evolving forms of innovation and governance. Recognition of the value generated by players’ emergent creativity also was, then, a consistent part of game creators discourses. Of course, players investment in building activity was noted to be articulated with authority issues, leading T.L. Taylor to ask the

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question: “*Whose game is this anyway?*” (Taylor 2006b). The authority question also is central in the observation and analysis work conducted by T.M. Malaby on *Linden Lab* and *Second Life* which questions designers and players respective contributions to the building of compelling virtual universes (Malaby 2009).

This paper precisely addresses the complexity of the relationship between designers and players of a game universe by trying a change of perspective. Instead of wondering what can get designers closer to players, it will try to understand what is defining their role and allowing them to play it, in other words what keeps them apart. Grounding my analysis on a vast study of both sides, conception and use, of one of these game universes, I aim more precisely at highlighting why and how a meaningful distance and some meaningful boundaries are built and maintained between the *designer* and *player* qualifications. Drawing a frontier between those two sides of the *Age of Utopia* game world, maintaining a distance that let players stay “in game” and defining very distinctive roles for them, therefore appears to be the non trivial result of a continuous work. By focusing on the social and technical *agencement* of mediations that allows to keep at bay designers and players, my contribution follows recent calls to consider virtual worlds as sociotechnical artefacts (Crogan et Kennedy 2008; Taylor 2009) considering *agencement* as Michel Callon defined it : « *An agencement is constituted by fixtures and furnishings, by elements that allow lines to be drawn and territories to be constituted* » (Callon 2008, 38). This work then tries to contribute to a better understanding of the conditions in which authority is shared in the building of virtual worlds.

THE SHARED WORLD: AGE OF UTOPIA

Age of Utopia (AoU) is the title of an online multiplayer role playing game universe, which went into development in 2000 and was released in 2004. The service of *Age of Utopia*, provided by the French game company Stillnode was studied through participant observation (2006-2008), as an operational member of the company community management team. Interviews were made with most of the different workteams members (20). Most of the work documents and archives that were available on Stillnode servers' networks were collected, sorted and analyzed. We also set up an online survey directed to the French community of players, and interviewed some of the 208 respondents. This ethnography allowed the collection of qualitative data about what may be called *Age of Utopia's* ‘shared fantasy’, covering a period which starts at the beginning of the project and ends when the servers were officially shut down in 2008.¹

Age of Utopia can be described as a multiplayer online game, or even as a virtual world. MMOGs, taken as a concept, are multidimensional: the terms are covering at the same time the very distinct ideas of an audience, of leisure practices, of a fictional narrative universe, of systems of rules or game software, of structures of production and technical infrastructures. In many studies on video games, only few of those non exhaustive dimensions are taken into account or put in relation to one another. The MMOGs or virtual world terms may then be describing alternatively one or another of these dimensions. Our investigation tries to comprehend those different dimensions of interaction occurring between developers, technologies and users.

The project began in the late 1990s. Its first logs on archives are, in 2000, calls for investment, which contained production, organisation, storyline, game systems and graphics design documents. At the same time, interviews were released to a professional (game & economic) press. From this essentially discursive material, we found *Age of*

Utopia as something which tried to be defined and stood out by being positioned between a multiplayer universe (referring at this time on Sony's *EverQuest* as a dominant model) and an experimental cyberspace, and by developing an original, business model, grounded on the open source movement. Indeed, when *Age of Utopia* was actually launched, at the end of 2004, after a full year of beta testing and a broken agreement with a publisher, the world as an object mediated through software had, at a first glance, little to compare with its "foundations" documents. There were neither the will to be the first open-source MMORPG anymore, nor to introduce promised innovative elements of gameplay (as was, for instance, avatar's permanent death). Organisation had also changed a lot.

The first organized and "managed" *Age of Utopia*'s alternatives websites and forums, have been hosted on online games website's popular portals since 2003. From this date, they were practiced by people who already invested and tried to take part in the universe. Helped by the documentation and information Stillnode was releasing; they held debates on which kind of game AoU had to be. As a matter of fact, these forums have, relatively, a significant quantitative contribution for the period before the game release (55 to 60% of their total amount of threads are created in this period)². So, in early 2003, *Age of Utopia* already displayed a narrative content, a brand imagery, and an elective audience, all of them specific to this new world. Of particular interest here is the fact that websites, forums - both official and alternatives ones, are not only mediations for information but also the first online shared spaces dedicated to *Age of Utopia*.

The description of some of the processes involved in the making of the game software, which will be released as the support of the *Age of Utopia* service to subscribers, may highlights part of the world's boundaries negotiation work. However, the question of what is *Age of Utopia* made of cannot be limited to this "world-object". As noted T.L. Taylor on her *EverQuest* ethnography: *"The boundaries of the game often are not recognizable because Web sites and fan forums push at them, providing invaluable information for actually playing. The collective production of game experience and knowledge does not simply constitute a helpful "addon" to the game, but is a fundamental factor in both its pleasure and sustainability. (...)"* (Taylor 2006b, 135-136). Similar reasoning can be found in Mia Consalvo's work. Even if her focus is put on alternative markets surrounding games, she notes how out-of-game productions ("paratext" in her own word) *"shape the gameplay experience in particular ways"*, furthermore *"Yet not all such shaping—or attempts to shape—went unchallenged, either by the game industry or the players themselves."* (Consalvo 2007). Following the cheating phenomenon as an introduction in MMOGs study, the work of Kerr and de Paoli highlights the extension and defence of the game space as a technological and mediated territory (De Paoli et Kerr 2009). Their analysis draws on the conflicting sociotechnical dimension of articulation of game and so-called *metagame*, and on the way this dynamic feeds their respective evolution. The observations that we conducted in the mediation processes which constitute the core activity of community managers tend to emphasize this point.

DESIGN AND PLAY AS DISTINCT WORLD BUILDING ACTIVITIES

"(...) thus, what the example of Kesey and the Pranksters should lead us to consider is the nature of individual agency in a game as it related the authority to make a game." – T.M. Malaby, 2009, p.91.

Playing has already been defined by the sociologist Erving Goffman as involving explicit world building activities, referring then to the singularity of meanings attributed to objects and behaviours in a play-focused interaction. By playing, the participants of a game are continuously negotiating interpretations of their interactions and so building a common frame with specific meanings. However, play interactions occur when people practice games and all the meanings involved in the situation of play are not defined by the play interaction itself. So, what is the role of games in the play building activities? In Goffman's perspective, games, for instance a card game, are viewed as delivering a matrix of possible events, as *"material for realizing the full range of events and role of these worlds [that is] locally available for participants"* (Goffman 1961, 26).

Our analysis on MMOGs suggests that this kind of games can be considered as a material frame, conveying and constraining meanings as well as offering spaces for negotiating them, in order to allow the world adjustments that are constitutive of play interactions. This kind of phenomenon challenges analysis by its dynamic dimensions. It is then useful here to rely for analysis on a social world framework method/theory package, presented by Adele E. Clarke and Susan Leigh Star as allowing to analyse multiple levels of complexity. Mainly following the work of Howard Becker (1986) and of Anselm Strauss (1978), the social world framework defines the concepts of social world, arena, and infrastructure that will be mobilized here :

- Social worlds are groups of actors "doing things together", sharing objects and universes of discourse. *"Social worlds (...) generate shared perspectives that then form the basis for collective action while individual and collective identities are constituted through commitments to and participation in social worlds and arenas."*
- Arenas are broader social ensembles, where various social worlds may intersect : *"if and when the number of social worlds becomes large and crisscrossed with conflicts, different sorts of careers, viewpoints, funding sources, and so on, the whole is analyzed as an arena. An arena, then, is composed of multiple worlds organized ecologically around issues of mutual concern and commitment to action"*.
- Infrastructures *"can be understood, in a sense, as frozen discourses that form avenues between social worlds and into arenas and larger structures."* (Clarke et Star 2008, 113-115)

Stressing the partly shaped dimension of games, anthropologist Thomas M. Malaby's definition can here be joined to a world building perspective on play activities: *"games are semi bounded and socially legitimate domains of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes"* (Malaby 2007). In these terms, games could be understood, in their 'semi-bounded' part, as 'frozen discourse' constituting some kind of infrastructure for playing practices. This infrastructure may then be seen as acting as structural conditions (Strauss 1993) in their ability to allow 'socially legitimate domain of contrived contingencies' and thus the negotiation of 'interpretable outcomes'. Learnings of *Age of Utopia* historic case put attention not only on the fact that the world's universe evolution appears as the result of a negotiation between heterogeneous social worlds, but also on the fact that this process is focused on the intents of changing or defend permanencies, because permanencies are able to inform, constraint or prevent the world from other changes. The frame, or the infrastructure of the game could thus be considered

as both mean and purpose of *Age of Utopia* building activities. Both players and designers of Utopia negotiate changes in the shared definition of the world. The question thus is how these negotiations occur, and how authority is distributed on interpretational and infrastructural kind of changes.

Here again, we meet Malaby's relevant work on the Lindens relationship to Second Life users, when he stresses attention on "*a perhaps unexpected distinction between two types of makers – the makers of the game and the makers of the environment for the game.*" However, there is still a problem with a conception that associates on one side designers as "local politicians", *makers of the game*, with agency on the infrastructural domains of the game world, and on the other the players, *makers of the environment* (or meaning) *of the game*, with agency on the interpretable ones. This perception tends to provide a binary and unrealistic view of "players" and "designers" as pre-existent homogeneous worlds. Moreover it hardly allows investigating the sociotechnical mediations that are sustaining a compelling distance between these two figures.

Social Worlds of design

Yet, regarding Stillnode's case, the "designers" qualification covers a quite large panel of professionals, activities and perspectives on what the game universe should be, with their own internal chain of command, struggles, and negotiations: game designers, programmers, sales agents customer supporters and community managers all participate in defining the online world but do not "naturally" share a common perspective on it, and do not have the same amount of legitimacy for it. It must be noticed that the *agencement* of authority and legitimacy inside the Stillnode teams has evolved a lot during this 8-years development project.

During observation, programmers regularly investigated AoU software code as if they were archaeologists, asking other members for specifications and history, because the software engine behave in a way they cannot figure out. As Patrick O. tells : *There are no specification documents. On some task, big picture of what happens is: « We'd like to do this », « oh, maybe you can try the script ». People have vague memories of somebody who could have written the good script. And there you go and search. (...) And if no one knows about it, 'cause he worked with the good people or heard about it, they say: 'well we have to build a new one'. It soon becomes kind of a big messy machine: systems wired on systems wired on systems ... Others complain, like Remi, gossiping on six years old technical and design choices contriving their everyday work : (...) And that's how we got the great raw mats system, which we have to fight every time we have to add a mat. It's a comprehensive design. It allows to craft the best weapon, but not to change its maximal level. It means that currently, if you get the mats in game, you can craft the perfect weapon. Consequently, we cannot plan to offer better weapons on new high level content design."*

Any change of the Utopia universe requires complex negotiations with a sociotechnical *infrastructure*. New concepts, game mechanisms or any kind of content for the game, all have to be worked on to be perceived by current teams as legitimate for Stillnode, and have to be negotiated with the actual technical set of constraints. The game servers, the game code have their own history and evolution, which the current teams do not control entirely, and may react to changes in an unexpected way.

Social worlds of play

Though *Age of Utopia* players often assert the sense of being part of a community, they happen to differ in their social profiles, and even more in their game practices and representations. Analysis on the data collected through the online survey on french speaking AoU's players corroborates on these points other quantitative works conducted on MMOG's audiences (Williams et al. 2008; Berry 2009; Coavoux 2010). It also revealed that, more than frequency or intensiveness of the game practice, practices and representations of the game showed socially relevant divergences between players.

If time spent weekly in game by those players did not seem to be related to social characteristics, being more involved in craft, in combat, or in roleplaying may on the contrary depend on their age, education, profession, and lifestyle. Youngest Utopians and students for instance state themselves as practising combat as a main activity in game while older Utopians mostly favour craft and trade. Furthermore, play practice has its own internal dynamic, and veterans tend to distance themselves from core gameplay activities (as combat). Last, in game sociability seems to have a consequent influence on individual kind of commitment.

These divergences in practices and associated representations of Utopia universe do not only match, but often overpass the heterogeneity planned by game designers. Variety and plasticity of communication and interaction mediums allow players to develop subtle management of the specific needs involved by this heterogeneity of practice. As players are building meanings in the play interaction, a game feature may have different signification, according to a singular community of practice.

The faction-tag in Utopia for instance, which should have been activated by each participant of a player vs player combat interaction, took a distinct meaning for players assuming themselves as PvP-oriented players, and for players assuming themselves as roleplayers. These last ones considered it as a feature allowing players to proclaim and defend their ingame designed political allegiance. For their part, combat-oriented Utopians considered that having activated the faction-tag was an invitation to fight, regardless of ingame political commitment. This point generates concrete issues for each part and a lot of debates within the play publics : *“Real roleplayers usually are tagged. It is not unusual for another team to come, tag and steal their mobs. I personally enjoy it, but it generates conflicts.”* (Kyra, player and volunteer, may 2006). In game, negotiating a common interpretation of a game feature may not be successful. Especially if divergences are related to social worlds specific common representation, for instance qualifying the faction-tag case as being a roleplay or a gameplay issue. This kind of case quickly conveys the game world own identity : *“I dont' care about faction wars for faction war, otherwise I'd play Counter Strike, not Utopia”* (AoU's forum, may 2006), and call for Stillnode arbitration : *“AoU is not made for this. But gameplay is allowing it. Will we have to hunt player killer until Stillnode dedide to change its system ? (...) [...] It is time for an official statement from Stillnode or from the support team on this [...]”* (AoU's forum, may 2006)

Thus, MMOGs publics can be hardly reduced to a social world in itself. Moreover, players' heterogeneous practices and representations do not only coexist but are expressed, spread, adopted, rejected, sometimes opposed, and even imposed on each other. As noted Samuel Coavoux game practices are not socially or culturally equal (Coavoux 2010). In other words, they are also the object of social negotiations, in a

dynamic process which involve the appropriation of mediatised spaces, technological knowledge and tools. The appropriation of tools and *outgame* media spaces by players strongly relates to the heterogeneity and to the social dynamics of this population (Boutet 2010; Zabban 2009).

DESIGNERS AND PLAYERS

Players call for referee

On one hand, Utopia players largely and actively contributed on a large variety of media spaces (fansites, forums, databases, encyclopedia), to the building of a compelling and evolving game universe. In the meantime, because alternate interpretations of the game infrastructure cannot always simply coexist, as illustrates the faction-tag case, Utopians did not only recognize but also expected and comforted the need for a central authority on the game world, though they may question Stillnode's team legitimacy to exert it.

This tension between creativity developed by consumers and loyalty to something which is considered as an original and legitimate creation was observed in the fandom phenomenon by Henri Jenkins, revealing there a paradox in the fans and producers relationship (Jenkins 2006). But in their need to refer to an actual *game master*, the virtual world audience echoes mostly here to Gary Alan Fine analysis of roleplaying as a *copyrighted subculture*. Gary Alan Fine showed how *TSR Hobbies* decision to change Gygax and Arneson *Dungeons & Dragons* rulebooks in 1978 was driven both by their audience evolution, and by the need to reassert a central control on the product: "*By changing the rules and by making those changes part of the new reality of the game, the manufacturers asserted their control and created a new demand for their product.*" (Fine 1989). Fine's work on roleplaying subculture (Fine 2002) also helps to understand how the game referee position maintains a coherence needed by participant who want to play, and so to share a partially bounded world composed of material, rules, and meanings.

The efforts put by some utopians in the building of an online encyclopedia for roleplayers illustrate quite well this ambiguous relationship to the designer authority. AoUpedia was built by the roleplay community as a response to the perceived inadequacy of information and tools that Stillnode provide them for their game practice : "*AoUpedia was a vehicle, it was providing immediate and user-friendly answers to what players will likely wonder while when doing roleplay in AoU : what is my food, what are my clothes, what are this people believing in ? What time is it?*" (Yves, AoU's player).

Roleplayers needed to share a common knowledge on the world that they pretend to inhabit in order to be able to sustain compelling interaction within it. In other words, they needed structural conditions on which they would be able to negotiate new meanings for the play world. So they started to gather and assemble any kind of official information (in game, press release, archives) about the Utopia universe, centralized this information, and made it easily searchable for Utopians.

Somehow, regarding roleplay, AoUpedia has a function comparable to other game world database research tools which are built and provided to game users (Allhakazam, Thottbot, or Wowhead for instance). They "only" create new associations between pieces of information that are already available for players. But precisely, creating new associations may be considered as an intent to work and legitimate new definitions of the game world. As such, they raise a legitimacy issue. Even if some Stillnode's teams were

actually used to refer to this kind of tools as being relevant for quick information research on the game universe, they would never publicly show any sign of this recognition. At stake here is the non trivial question of who is able to write, and eventually to change, the definition of the world.

All players do not vow an unconditional admiration to creators of their universe. On the other hand, most of them are strongly attached to what they consider as structural elements for their specific practices and representations, and often try to get “devs” attention on it. Problem is that the definition of these structural elements varies with the heterogeneity of practices. Players calls for referee have then to be carefully considered by designers, who precisely do not want to arbitrate heterogeneity in their subscribers game practices. For instance, by ratifying definitions of the world provided by a few roleplay-oriented players.

In a perfect designers’ world, any kind of arbitration should be a pragmatic one and should be done by code programming of the game software. A natural answer to players dilemmas would be : “if the system is allowing it, then you are allowed to do it.” As willing to provide a unique service to a massive heterogeneous publics, MMOG’s game rules and systems actually tend to avoid players call for referees.

Players in design

Players are free to speak, problem is that there are people in companies who also have ideas and that these ideas do not always match a player’s ones. So for sure, we keep all players suggestions in a database, but I can hardly tell you they are used actually. (Julien, Lead Customer Support).

At first glance, listening to AoU designers discourses on their subscribers, in a perfect designer’s game world, there wouldn’t be any players³. As usual, when looking at engineering activities and practices, users are not exactly welcome figures within the development teams. T.L. Taylor observed that development teams often have representations of their users reducing them to a set of constraints (Taylor 2006a). Stillnode developers’ teams essentially perceived Utopians agency as the ability to waste and/or ruin their work, as inconsistent or incompetent individuals on whom depended their future. These observations strongly contrast with some studies from the last decade which emphasized the birth of a new age for the relationship between designers and players grounded on co-creation and co-development.⁴

Users’ figured representations are more mobilized by AoU’s workers than by actual players. In 2006, when the survey was carried on, the only sources of information on players actual practices are the forums and in game support feedbacks provided by the community management and support teams. While, theoretically, very detailed and relevant data is available on any player action, no effort was devoted to develop tools that would provide systematic data on what the players were doing with the world released by the company. Current players are more considered as a necessary trouble than as partners in the game world’s building (“*Players are not designers, they don’t know what is good for them*” Fabien, Lead Community Management). This kind of phenomenon in game production processes already was observed by Aphra Kerr (2002). who establishes a relevant relation with research focused on the role that is actually played by users in technological development (Akrich 1992; Oudshoorn et al. 2004). Following these works

designers are led up to identify themselves as users and lean on this identification process for their work on new product.

Aphra Kerr also suggests that the design in the digital game business may reveal strong links with the cultural industries processes. AoU's indeed, is not only an ongoing development product but also a media service, dealing with a specific representation of users groups : audience. As media and cultural industry studies can teach us, imagined collectives as publics or audiences have a consistent role to play in cultural industries production processes, as suggests John Hartley: *"Naming an audience usually also involves homogenising it, ascribing to it certain characteristics, needs, desires, and concerns. The audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined"* (Hartley 2002, 11).

Stillnode's case showed that, as players may have an instrumental relation to the designer legitimate figure, designers made a similar use of the players. As a constraining figure, players appeared indeed as a powerful source of legitimacy in world building negotiations, as François, working with the Quality Assurance team, told us in an interview : *"I leaned on my player experience, but I also matched this experience with real players ones. Cause sometimes I thought, "ok, it would be nice to do such thing", and eventually a few days later, by chance, we got the same feedback from players. So I know for sure it is a good idea. Also I used to be a trainee, and then I could hardly dare to advance my own ideas. I had no experience in game design, I needed support."*

Mediations

Looking backwards on the Stillnode's project history, the introduction of players in the *Age of Utopia* arena shows how the dynamics of play cannot be restricted to Stillnode's area of authority. The exponential development of a continuum of tools and staff mediating and translating communication between *Age of Utopia* players and developers (customer supporters, game masters, and community managers) has been observed as Stillnode's response to this phenomenon. This mediation department appears to be central in the process which articulates and negotiates the changes and permanencies of the world.

A strong belief within Stillnode studio is that there are, within AoU's audience, noisy and silent communities. The noisy community is precisely the one that provides direct feedback from their game practice and representations on various official communications tools: forums, fansites, IRC dedicated channels, etc. This noisy community is also the one claiming for referee, and trying to get developers attention. Giving too much attention to this noisy minority means facing the risk to loose impartial position, and to not consider sufficiently the needs of the "silent community". Roughly, silent players have fun in game and do not share noisy players criticisms against the designers choices: *"There will still be people whining on boards, and people not going on the forum to note improvements. These people are the silent community"*.

Even considered as mostly partial and irrelevant, Stillnode still have to manage the game official forum cries, as they function as a public space falling under its authority domain. In addition to that, no matter how impartial and biased spaces of information forums are supposed to be, they remain one of the rare sources for getting information on what is happening in game and on the players' mood. To sum up, beyond their format effects on discourses, forums cries are a crucial piece for mediations.

To ensure an efficient communication, messages from each part have to be translated by a continuum of intermediaries: moderators, community respondents, and community managers. Another main piece of this *agencement* is constituted by the whispers of the customer support team, which constitute an in-game relay, and is managed through a very hierarchical organization. Most of the intermediary people of the community management and customer support are current or former AoU players and are working as volunteers for Stillnode. Volunteers are a mostly sensible subpopulation of players for the lead community manager : *“There is a community of players and there is a volunteers community : they are about an hundred of special players who we have to take care of. It is a real community with its own dramas, ups and downs. It’s like a city, or a mafia, we must watch out that all will be ok.”* (Fabien, Lead Community Management). In this mediation continuum, closeness to the players means a restricted access to the tools and to information from the development part. *“At the volunteers level, you remain a player, so inevitably there are tools you will never see and information you will never get. ”* (Julien, Lead Customer Support).

Graduation of authority according to closeness and interactions with the players, variety of communication supports (forums, instant messaging outgame or ingame, emails) offer vast choice to designers in order to manage emerging issues, in a very constraining timing. For instance a forum alert that evolves in a popular thread must be quickly managed, but answers to players often require long investigation and validation processes. Most of the time in this case volunteers react with anonymous interventions, under their player identity, and try to ease people’s minds. Conversely, forums, fansites, and volunteers’ hierarchical feedback offer multiple means to the publics of players to get the developers’ attention.

Reporting is another main activity for the intermediary people who essentially do a two-way translating work. At each point of the mediation, information is filtered and translated according to local representation of the receptors needs. Community managers assistants are asked by their lead to filter forums content in their feedback reports and do it by highlighting subject that can get the attention of the Stillnode teams. Conversely public communications towards players also are worked on with meticulous care: *“Devs do not know how to speak to players, we need to rephrase their messages so players can understand them.”* Players are not welcome in the backstage for obvious reasons of equity and security, but also that they are protected by those who passed over the frontier from facing the reality of the world making, and from what is considered as a risk to loose interest in game.

CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE RIGHT DISTANCE

Age of Utopia may be considered as an arena where multiple social worlds - of designers and of players - are intersecting. Within this arena, social worlds are involved in world building and bounding activities. Considering the very dynamic attribute of game universes, investigating one of them on a long term and through multiple perspectives allows to question the conditions of this negotiation of changes and permanencies.

“Designers” and “players” are in fact uncertain and relative qualifications, though they actually function as operational distinctions. All participants to the continuous building of Utopia universe plead for their own definition of the game world. However, some of them recognize themselves as players and others as designers, although they may actually be situated in between, as it is the case for volunteers, or community respondents.

The designers want the involvement and participation of players in the game world development but, at the same time, they want players to stay in game and act as players. The players want the designers to agree with their definition of the game world but at the same time, they want them to impartially master the game and act as designers. These tensions may result of a large amount of heterogeneity from both design and play parts, that must be managed in order to be able to share the same world. On the design part, some of the negotiations on the changes and permanencies of the game infrastructure can try to lean on players' feedbacks in order to gain legitimacy. On play part, the heterogeneity of practice and representations could conduct to secessions without the presence nor the intervention of a referee.

A complex *agencement* of mediations which involves technologies as well as social elements, allows the flexible management of this sensitive tension in the relationship between players and designers. Keeping apart those who only play and have fun from those who are allowed to define the game world appears thus both as constitutive of the game world dynamics and as the result of a permanent work of bounding and rebounding. These kinds of mediations are certainly a part of what Richard Garfield called the “*metagame*” and defined as what interfaces games with life (Garfield 2000). What separates players from designer, this set of tools, functions and relations tries to maintain the centrality and the authority of the firsts and tries to let the seconds stay in a free and volunteering relation to the game universe. Keeping the right distance between players and designers also means keeping the right distance on which depends the ability of a game to captivate, and so on which may depend “*fun in game*”.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This fieldwork was conducted as part of a PhD in sociology. The name of the product has been changed to respect a non disclosure agreement.

² Of course most of the decrease in contribution has to be attributed to the fact that AoU did not succeed at catching subscribers at the release time, and then lost at least half of the beta audience (a loss which is also relying on the transition to paying accounts.) However, this does not have to fade the process of appropriation and the way it impacted Age of Utopia definition.

³ For instance a former game designer told us: “*A good player is a player who doesn't play. Because he pays subscription and doesn't block servers*”.

⁴ See Jepessen et Molin (2003).

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