Monetising memory? MMOGs, anniversaries, and ownership of the past

Nick Webber
Birmingham City University
Birmingham, UK
nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper explores the relationship between online game communities and game providers in relation to memory and game experiences, as enacted during moments of remembrance: here, anniversaries. The different approaches to memory discussed in the paper represent a variety of attitudes to the relationship between the concerns of online game providers and their communities. As such, it makes a contribution to ongoing discussions in Game Studies around player culture in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), offering researchers further insight into issues which have been of enduring interest for the discipline.

This interest is demonstrated in a range of academic work attending to games of this kind (including, but not limited to, Taylor 2006; Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008; Pearce 2009; Carter, Bergstrom and Woodford 2016). Research has attended to memorial activity in a number of such games (e.g. Gibbs et al. 2012; 2016), but there has been less attention to the ways in which these games themselves are the focus of acts of memorial and commemoration. Here, I explore the role these games play in the memories of their players and in the presentations of the companies which create and maintain them, how tensions between these roles are negotiated, and with what results.

Across 2018 and 2019, some of the longest-running MMOGs see significant anniversaries. May 2018 marked the 15th anniversary of *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003), March 2019 the 20th anniversary of *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company 1999), and November 2019 the 15th anniversaries of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *EverQuest 2* (Daybreak Game Company 2004). In common with many other aspects of cultural life, these anniversaries mark important moments of celebration, both for the games' producers, and for the communities around them. As Elizabeth Jelin (1998) has observed, 'dates and anniversaries are critical junctures in which memory is activated' but, 'at such moments, memories are multiple and at times in conflict'. It is revealing, therefore, to explore the tensions that emerge around these anniversaries, and the attitudes of both players and game providers towards anniversary activities.

In her seminal study of *EverQuest*, T.L. Taylor (2006, 125-50) explored some of the complexities surrounding intellectual property and the ownership of material which could be considered part of, or related to, the game. At first glance, these anniversary

activities seem simply to reprise the issues that Taylor highlighted, evident in the approach taken by Daybreak Game Company (DGC) towards its celebration of the pending 20th anniversary of *EverQuest*. Under this programme, players' stories of their experiences were to be submitted to the company either via email or through its proprietary 'Player Direct' platform. The reward for compliance with this process was a chance to be included in a PCGamer article or 'to be featured during our anniversary celebrations!' (Roxxlyy 2019). Yet there was a caveat, as Player Direct made clear: any outputs 'that contain or are based on in-game events' are considered 'Content' and regulated under the company's terms and conditions.[1] Such frameworks are not abnormal, and as Taylor notes, raise questions about the abilities of people to participate in culture, and to retain control of their own creativity (Taylor 2006, 139-49).

Here, however, the discussion ranges further again, pushing into concerns about ownership and 'monetisation' of the past. For *EVE Online*'s 10th anniversary (2013), CCP Games ran the 'True Stories' competition, through which player stories were collected on a website, and the story receiving the most votes written up and published as a graphic novel. Yet while this competition was acceptable to the player base, the suggestion that an individual player (or small group of players) might generate income in a similar manner – through the production of a novel about in-game events – was not so well received (see Milik and Webber 2017).

This focus on ownership as a matter of exploitable value overlooks the cultural significance of these anniversary moments, however. Anniversary celebrations serve a predominantly symbolic function as a deliberately created place of memory, a *lieu de mémoire* in Pierre Nora's famous words (Nora 1989, 12, 18-19). As noted, such *lieux* are points of conflict, of contestation; but they are also critical to community cohesion and identity (see Lagerkvist 2014, 206). Indeed, commemorative events are usually planned with this specific purpose in mind (Frost and Laing 2013, 1). In respect of the anniversaries explored in this paper, therefore, it is important to be mindful that these are not simply *game* anniversaries but, in fact, *community* anniversaries as well. This is ably demonstrated by *Thank You for 15 Years* (Final Fantasy XI Community, 2017), a community-produced book celebrating the 15th anniversary of *Final Fantasy XI* (Square Enix 2002), which was not framed by the game provider. It offered output in a similar form to that of the contributions to 'True Stories', but privileged a polyvocal community view over that of a single player or game provider, thus representing a different approach to memory again.

I conclude that there is a degree to which game providers such as CCP and DGC understand the centrality of community in these activities, and they make specific reference to the value of the community in shaping their games (seen, for example, in Roxxlyy 2019). That said, the removal of the 'True Stories' pages when CCP's website was redesigned, and DGC's attempts to 'stage manage' the *EverQuest* celebrations, indicate a particular attitude towards ownership which applies it not only to games and their communities, but even to those communities' experiences. In their treatment of player memories, then, both companies assert their authority to decide 'what the "proper" ways to remember are' (Jelin 1998) – legitimising specific interpretations of the past while simultaneously neglecting or rejecting others. The variety of approaches to memory at play, and the tensions they reflect, echo Nora's observation that 'memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual' (1989, 9). As with other forms of *lieux de mémoire*, then, MMOG anniversaries are complex sites of struggle, over both the present and the past.

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ENDNOTES
[1] https://www.daybreakgames.com/player-direct.