Paidia to Ludus, Non-Commodity to Commodity: Uncovering the Residue of Player Developed Custom Game Modes in ‘Zombies’ and ‘ARAMs’

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
One the challenges to studying games, in particular the diverse practices of online games, is accounting for the multiple influences, actors and motivations that permeate through any given rule structure (Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2009). The online context for playing, similar to wider forms of online sociality, has become a pool of experience that is both meaningful and valuable beyond the ephemeral consequences of simply playing for its own sake. It is this co-creative relationship between the bottom-up actions of players or fans and the top-down responses from developers and their respective gaming platforms that has come to define a variety of influential and innovative games genres (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Banks, 2013). This paper draws attention towards an underexplored facet of these co-creative dynamics through specifically considering the origins of various taken for granted game modes and their mangled, intricate, and often blurry history in grassroots modes of alternative or ‘paidia’ play.

In Caillois’ (1958) influential distinction between ludus and paidia he describes paidiac play as ‘spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct’. Although paidia is by its definition the antithesis to any established framework and any digital form is bound by its status as a construction tied to codified rules, paidiac modes of play are nonetheless rife in digital games. Game studies has typically responded to the dichotomy between ludus and paidia through the separation of goal orientated games and open world or sandbox games (Kennedy and Dovey, 2006; Pearce, 2009). Sandbox games, due to their open world format and lack of any strict goals are said to represent the paidiac elements of ‘diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety’ (Caillois, 1958: 13). However, these digital spaces for paidia orientated modes of play also represent a pool of playful innovation that underpins some of the most popular game modes in the world. Through delving into the origins of these game modes, this paper draws upon the
recorded histories written by fans who pioneered these rule sets and continue to keep the fading grassroots residue of these rules alive in Wikipedia and Reddit spaces (1).

With a particular focus upon two influential examples of non-competitive modes of play that originated from sandbox or ‘custom game’ spaces, this paper looks at the mangled and distorted history of how ‘Zombies’ from the Halo series and ‘All Random All Mid’ (or ‘ARAM’) from League of Legends (2009 - present, Riot Games) both came into being. In both of these game modes exists two of the most popular ways to play these online games that each attract hundreds of thousands of players to their simple yet appealing rule sets. Both modes of play have been fully implemented into the ongoing architecture of these games by developers and consequently have extended the appeal and economic value of their platform games in significant ways. Up until now, the playful and political economy of this transition has gone underexplored.

In following the residue of grassroots play, this paper gestures towards recent socio-technical histories (Montfort and Bogost, 2009; Therrien, 2015) or archaeologies (Apperley and Parrika, 2015) of games platforms. Similar to the integration of mods or bottom-up sources of originality found in wider fan activities (Hills, 2002), these original rule sets were created in a non-commodity setting. As this paper critically explores however, the residue of that grassroots history and its paidia mode of play is often lost as the transition towards integrated modes of play commodifies and makes ludic (or more competitive) these modes of play. What this means for players of the game, fans who record these histories and developers who gain economic rewards for seizing these playful innovations are primary questions this paper explores and invites discussion into.

ENDNOTES
1 See for example, the Halo 2 Wikipedia that extensively lists many different modes of play that were prevalent in Halo 2 custom games. http://web.archive.org/web/20130330063451/http://h2.halowiki.net/p/Custom_Game_Types

BIBLIOGRAPHY