Gatekeeping Games: A Topographic Consideration of Para-Ludic Borderlands

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper I begin to map the intermediary space between game and gamer I call *para-ludic* space. Ludic space is enclosed within boundaries defined by the rules of a game. Para-ludic space is constructed through mechanisms of labeling and surveillance players must accept in order to enter ludic space. These mechanisms are often made experientially forgettable, or invisible. Para-ludic space is an intermediary place similar to the zone travelers encounter when arriving at foreign airports, but before passing customs, created by systems that serve as borders and access points for players entering games. I specifically call this space para-ludic in direct compliment to the work of scholars such as Genette and Maclean (1991), Jenkins (1992), Consalvo (2007), Jones (2008) and others who have considered para-textual settings, activity, and communities. Para-ludic space includes distribution and launch platforms, end-user license agreements (EULAs), and even character creation or selection systems that impose carefully designed constraints upon the roles players are allowed to inhabit. I consider how these mechanisms become tools for allocating and exercising power within and around ludic space.

Scholars such as Pearce (2009), and Crenshaw and Nardi (2014) describe instances of trans-game identities that highlight the traversal and negotiation of borders between ludic spaces. My reading of these scholars draws attention to the challenges players face when attempting to maintain a consistent presence within several games or game-related communities, especially, the challenges encountered specifically upon entry into new ludic spaces. Since most games are proprietary commercial systems created by competing companies, it is only natural that they do not interconnect directly. But, through digital delivery platforms such as Steam, Origin, XBL, and Uplay games can become indirectly connected through para-ludic interfaces that enable a unifying identifier between separate games. Accounts created for these platforms act as "passports" when entering individual games, and link a player's data across ludic spaces. In this work I look at Steam, the most popular and successful PC platform, as well as some aspects of games hosted by it, to illustrate how para-ludic spaces operate.

The *account name* a player creates for Steam becomes the label associated with what we would classically understand as their "file." Account names allow for Steam users to become individually legible to the company and algorithms that manage the platform, and all of its services. Steam explicitly monitors all activity regarding games entered, duration played, games browsed in the store, and games "wished" for. Steam collects information

about its players which is useful for a variety of purposes. James Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (1998) describes the introduction of surnames in England to make the populations more legible to governors or clergy in order to maintain accurate census data and collect taxes or tithes efficiently. Steam requires the use of account names for similar reasons of population legibility, but is able to leverage the data they collect in very different ways. Steam uses the information within individual "files" (often automatically through algorithmic functions) to shape continued interaction within their para-ludic boundaries, and indirectly, players' potential ludic expeditions. Instead of a tax record, Steam uses the account name labeled file primarily to make informed personalized suggestions for future game purchases.

In this paper I also briefly consider character creation or selection systems, which occur technically within individual game clients, but before game-play can occur. These systems require players to take on certain visually identifiable characteristics before entry into the game can be achieved. Some games allow for extensive customization of a player's in-game characteristics, but many do not. There are a number of reasonable justifications for limiting the visual embodiment available to players in-game, ranging from technical to narrative. But, of 129 games I surveyed that required players to take on a specific default character role, 73% required the player to play as male, and only 13% required the player to play as female. Of the male characters, 83% were white, with the next highest ethnicity represented being Latino at 3.2%. My previous consideration of account names describes creating legibility of players entering para-ludic space in order to track and record activity of players themselves prior to and during play. Character selection or creation systems can be seen influencing or controlling who players are allowed to be within games as they move from para-ludic to ludic-space.

Studying para-ludic space allows us to understand dynamics of player interaction beyond what occurs in-game, but still within the experience of gaming. Para-ludic space is particularly compelling and difficult to study because it cannot be considered by studying only games, or only distribution platforms because of how these technologies are evolving symbiotically. Considering para-ludic space provides new ground to evaluate patterns and flows of power and authority between developers, publishers, and players.

Keywords
Para-Ludic, Legibility, Intermediary Spaces

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