"I am sorry my friend, I love you, but I don't trust you": Social dynamics in a multiplayer collectible card game

Selen Turkay, Sonam Adinolf, Devayani Tirthali
Teachers College Columbia University

Abstract: This paper reports results pertaining to different social interactions among players of a popular multiplayer collectible card game, Vampire the Eternal Struggle (Vtes) over the course of a competitive game in a national championship. Video of an 80-minute long single gameplay session with five players was analyzed by using inductive coding. Findings showed eight main categories of social interactions: social banter, strategies, out-of-game comments, reflection on gameplay, negotiations, clarifications, complaining, and praises. Relationships between these social interactions and time were also identified revealing dynamic nature of social interactions due to multiplayer aspect of the game. The practical and theoretical implications of the findings are discussed within the context of game design and research.

Introduction

Development of information communication technologies enabled users to interact via many tools including online multiplayer games. While the interaction among the players of these games, and design principles for these interactions particularly Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) have been of interest to many scholars (e.g., Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Zagal, Nussbaum, & Rosas, 2000), with some exception (Xu, Barba, Radu, Gandy, & MacIntyre, 2011) little attention was given to examine social interactions of non-digital games especially collectible card games (CCGs).

Collectible Card Games (CCGs) combine the element of collection, with that of creation. A player may own many cards, but he must choose which ones he wishes to assemble into a deck. For a more in depth discussion see Adinolf and Turkay (2011). Considering the popularity of CCGs among school aged children and the surge of online CCGs in the market, the lack of interest from educational game community towards the study of CCGs is surprising. When designing an online version of a non-digital game, it is important to know what the affordances of tactile objects and co-located play on player experiences is. For example, Xu et al. (2011) investigated the social interactions based on how interaction is initiated by analyzing the recorded videos of four different card and board games. In their study, nine participants were invited to play these games weekly basis. Authors do not provide any information about players' experiences. This might be important since experience with the game as well as players' familiarity with each other may change the social interactions among them.

Social interaction between players is the key to the success of multiplayer games of any kind (Costikyan, 1998). It can be categorized into internal and external social play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Internal social play is about social interactions that stem from the gameplay whereas external social play happens when people carry their existing real world roles into their gameplay.

The previous study with V:tes community (Adinolf, Turkay, & Tirthali, 2012) revealed players' belief about game mechanics contributing greatly to the strength of the game community. This begs the question of what kind of interactions may take place during a gameplay session. Using qualitative video analysis as the main research method, this study aims to investigate different types of social interactions triggered by game mechanics and their density over the course of a gameplay session. The specific research questions are:

RQ1) What kind of game design elements of V:TES affect different kinds of social interaction?

RQ2) Does frequency of social interactions change over time?

The Game

Vampire: The Eternal Struggle, or V:TES as it is commonly called is a multiplayer collectible card game. In tournaments, the game is usually played with 5 players in each game. The format of the game is that each player would like to "oust" the player to their left, their "prey". That means the player to their right is their "predator", who wants to oust them. If a player's prey is ousted, even if they didn't do it themselves, that player receives one "victory point". The winner of the game is the player with the most victory points when the game ends, either due to only one player remaining, or time running out (2 hours is the standard time limit). The last person left standing re-

ceives their own victory point. Thus, it is possible, though very infrequent, for a player who has been ousted earlier to be the winner when the game ends.

A V:TES player has two decks, one large and one small. The small deck, called the "crypt", contains cards with vampires on them. These will be the "minions" that the player "influences" to do their bidding. The vampires must be influenced from the player's "pool" of influence, which is also their life. So, players must balance their desire for stronger vampires with the extra cost that must be paid, which makes the player more vulnerable. The second, larger deck is called the "library", and contains cards both for the player's and their minions' use.

Method

Participants and Setting

Players in the North American Championship (NAC) of VTES were informed about the study. We determined that we wanted to analyze the final table dynamic in the tournament. We chose a championship game because of the facility with the mechanics implicit in the players. This ensured (as best as can be with human beings) that the decisions we saw were deliberate, not the result of imperfect understanding of the game. This is especially important for a complex game like VTES.

The final table consisted of five players (whose names are replaced with pseudonyms for the paper). Seated around the table in clockwise order were: Marleybone, Jeremiah, Bartholomew, Randolph, and Sibella. Marleybone was playing a Malkavian stealth and bleed deck, with some defense in the form of bleed reduction and redirection. Jeremiah was playing a deck with larger vampires with political actions and bleed with stealth, as well as a lot of pool gain to help survive. Bartholomew was playing a very simple Malkavian stealth and bleed deck with just a little bit of intercept and redirection. Randolph was playing yet another stealth and bleed deck with lots of small or mid sized vampires and their allies. Sibella rounded out the stealth and bleed set with a deck very similar to Marleybone's, but (it turned out) with even more aggression.

If all of those deck descriptions sounded similar, that is because they are. All of them have a moderate to high level of "bleed" increasers, with the idea that bleed is the most straightforward way to reduce one's prey to 0 pool. All of them also had a moderate to high amount of stealth, which helps to have your actions succeed. So they were all (with Jeremiah being the possible exception) playing decks of the most simple sort, designed to attack their prey with little to no thought for the other 3 people at the table. Is this usual? As someone who has attended tournaments of various sizes and formats, I can say no. Different venues have different "metagames", or styles of deck which are prevalent. None is more aggressive than day 1 of the North American Championship (NAC). While being a tournament in its own right, with a final and prizes, day 1 of the NAC also determines which players get to continue on to play in day 2, with roughly the top 40% doing so. This extra metric serves to encourage people to play decks that can grab a Victory Point here and there, barring extreme misfortune. Thus, at least in theory, you will make the cutoff just based on playing the odds.

Data Analysis

In total, 80 minutes of gameplay video were captured. First author transcribed the audio of the game video as well as recorded the social and physical behaviors of players. Nvivo 9 was used to facilitate qualitative data analysis. The transcriptions and recordings were grouped into categories of social events. In total 412 social events were transcribed.

Findings

In total eight categories of social interactions emerged from data: 1) Negotiation and discussion; 2) Clarification and instruction; 3) Social banter; 4) Reflection on gameplay; 5) Strategies; 6) Out-of-game comments; 7) Encouragement and praise; 8) Complaining. Below we will discuss each category briefly. See Figure 1 for the distribution of these over the 80 minutes of gameplay. It is apparent from the figure that most diversity of social interactions took place between 40 minutes to 60 minutes in the game.
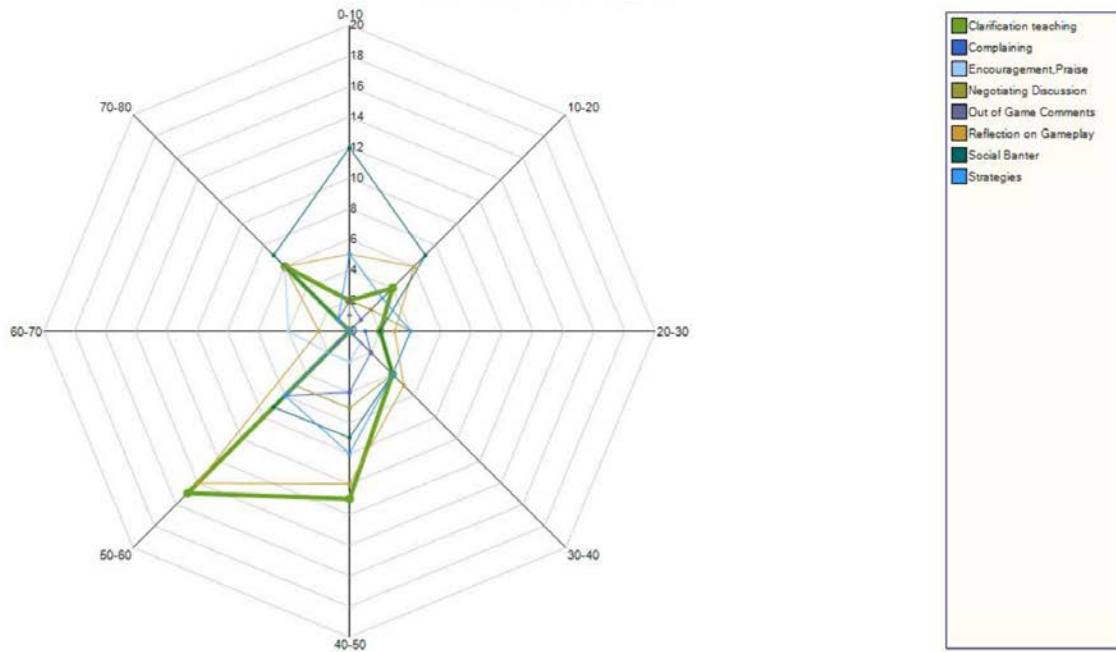
Figure 1: Radar display of the different types of social interaction over for 10 minute time sections over 80 minutes.

Negotiation and discussions

Negotiation is one of the main strategies people use in V:tes. Due to the nature of the tournament, there were less deal making and more aggressive deck types in the final game table. Despite that, we identified 22 different occasions of deal making and discussion events. In the following example, both B and J are working together against B's prey and negotiating their strategy:

> B: *So* (addressing J) *you're happy with me bleeding irresponsibly?*
> [He points out that bleeds might get bounced around to J.]
> J: *Yes, bleeds might get bounced. I can probably weaken him with votes, but I can't do all the work for you.*

The chart below shows the distribution of individual negotiations and discussions players had over the course of the game. As can be seen, negotiation activity during the middle four time segments is more dense, whereas during the last two segments there was no negotiation. This is because the game involved only 2 people after the 60 minutes.
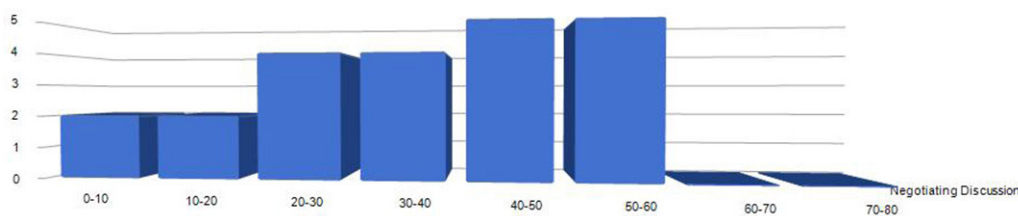

Figure 2: Number of negotiations took place over the course of the 80 minute game.

Clarification and instruction

One undeniable characteristic of V:tes is its complexity. The multiplayer aspect of the game adds another layer of complexity on top of the game's rules. Tournaments have to have a judge to resolve any confusion and enforce the rules of the game if necessary. Interactions with the judge consisted of merely rule clarifications during this game we examine here.

340

On the other hand, this game had a player who was less experienced with game rules or game cards. Other players had to explain what a certain action entails or details related to card that are played. In the game, Sibella was the least experienced player so other players took their time to read the card text or to explain certain rules in the game.

> S asks why other players laughed after a vampire entered into game. B explains that Maris Streck [a character card in the game] has an ability that changes the table dynamics, as she can burn blood to give anyone intercept. S nods.

As we can see below, 45 clarifications and instructing events were identified during the game and although it is distributed over the course of the game, the densest times are between 40 and 60 minutes.
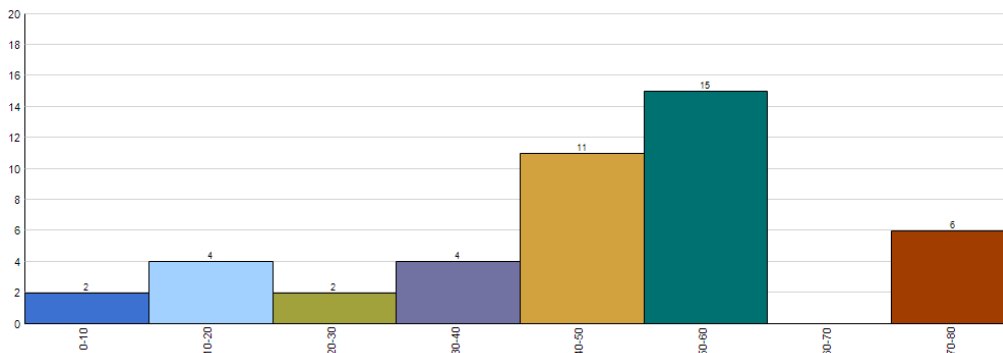

Figure 3: Number of clarifications and teaching took place over the course of the 80 minute game.

Social banter;

Social banter was one of the most prevalent interactions among players. Even though the game was a final table of a championship, players were still telling jokes and acting relaxed as possible.

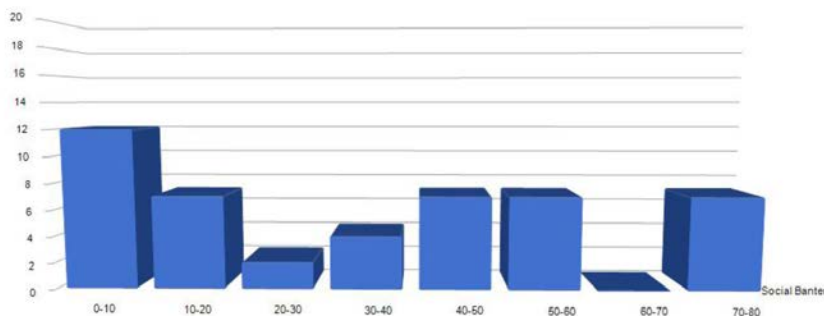> J (chuckling)(responding to something S said): I won't be swayed by promises of food. I do love food though.

Figure 4: Number of social banter recorded over the course of the 80 minute game.

Reflection on gameplay

Players react and reflect on gameplay after an action or negotiation took place. Some of these reactions were verbal, while some consisted of reflections with body language (e.g., making a sad face). We identify 51 instances of such events. The conversation below took place after J took an action to oust his prey (B) but B deflected his bleed action to R which resulted in ousting R and giving B six more pool.

> R: *Yeah,... You killed me and you gave him a VP.*
> J: *Here's why. He just took a bleed of 5 a minute ago. This would have ousted him, and I would have had 6 more pool.*
> R: *well, you were playing against me the entire game.*
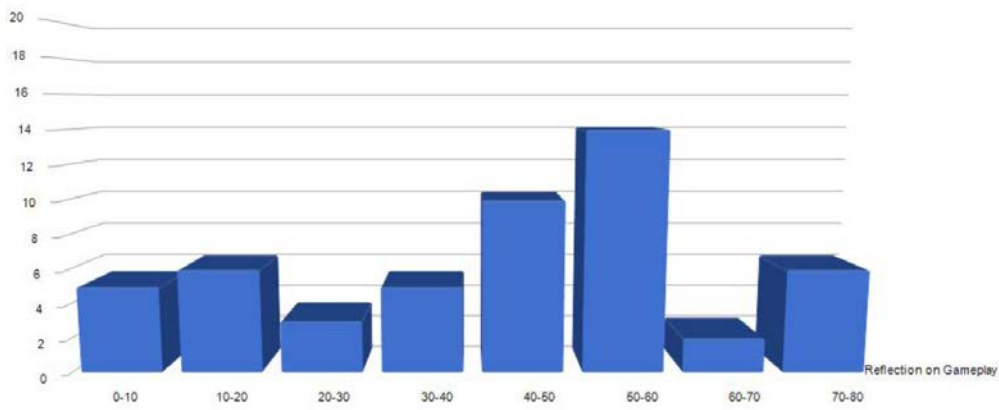> J: *I was trying to slow you down, I knew that you were fast.*

Figure 5: Number of reflection on the game recorded over the course of the 80 minute game.

Strategies

Players many times verbalize their strategies before they act or speculate on other player's overall strategies, sometimes as a way of manipulating other players' decisions. In this game, J was afraid that R would oust S and M quickly and be his predator. In this situation, even if the game timed out (if there is at least 2 players still remaining at the end of two hours), R would win the game because he had the most victory points to play in the final.

> J to S: "*He [R] wants you to soften him [M] up. If you can oust him, great, I don't think he'll stop much.*"
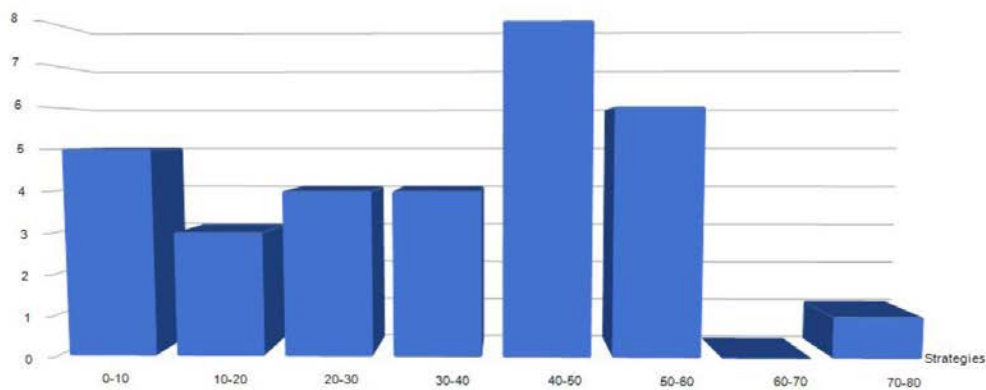

Figure 6: Number of strategies recorded over the course of the 80 minute game.

Out-of-game comments

These were comments about and reactions to out-of-game subjects. There were not many out-of-game comments due to the competitive nature of the game. In a casual game, it is more likely that people talk about out-game topics. There were total of seven out-of-game social interactions. Majority took place in the first half hour of the game.

Encouragement and praise

Players were encouraging each other if there was an action they approved. We identified 16 events in this category.

Complaining

This is one of the common strategies players of V:tes uses. It can be seen as social manipulation. There were 16 events categorized as complaints. It seems that players complain more and more as the game proceeds. After there were only two players left in the game (after 60th minute), no complaints were recorded.
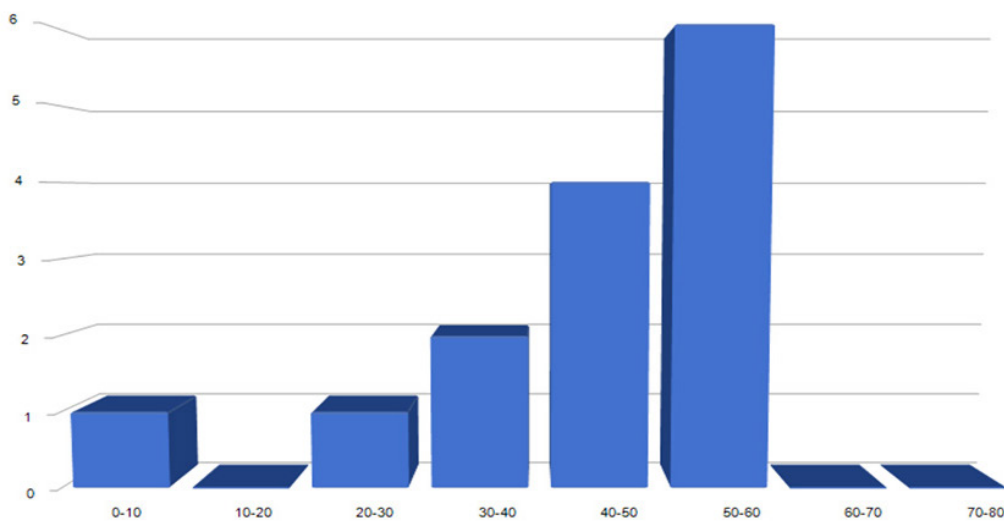
342

Figure 7. Number of complaints recorded over the course of the 80 minute game.

Design aspects for social interaction

Predator-Prey Relationship

Multiplayer CCGs have different set ups for player interactions other than the emergent interactions that are not designed by the rules. This game setup asks for long term strategy development (within a game).

Chores

Xu et al. (2011) defines chores as "the work necessary to make the play happen in these non-digital games. Players need to update and maintain the game status manually, taking care of rule enforcement and other forms of bookkeeping" (p.3). Chores are the activities that do not specifically require players' decision making.

Chores in V:teS are highly limited, as most aspects of the game involve choice on the part of the player. The only chores that regularly happen are untapping all your cards at the beginning of turn, and adjusting your pool or blood on vampires due to events. Everything else, even though it is mandatory, e.g. declaring whether you're blocking, involves a choice of some sort. Thus they would fall under the heading of game play.

Even altering your pool and blood tends to be so closely associated with in game decisions that it rarely gets talked about in its own right. For example, after declining to block a bleed, a player can still redirect the bleed, or reduce it. Hence, even taking the full amount of a bleed would still fall under the gameplay category. Unless, for some odd reason, the player commented "and now I'm moving the tokens from my pool to the bank..." or something similar.

Conclusion

This paper reported preliminary findings of an empirical study of social interaction in a CCG. Using an inductive analysis method, we identified eighth categories of social interactions. These interactions were mainly facilitated by the designed social mechanic into the game: prey-predator. This mechanics allows players to strategize their actions thinking about long-term (within the game sense) consequences of their actions. For instance, J in this game wanted to balance the game towards his own benefit by denying R a victory point therefore spending his game resources on R who was his second prey and removing him from the game would not give him a victory point. However, because he did not calculate a small detail he ended up giving his prey the game win. The results reported in this paper are based on the video analysis of a single gameplay session. Future studies needed to refine the model with players with variety of experiences.

References

Adinolf, S., Turkay, S., & Tirthali, D. (2012). In torpor, not dead: A look at a collectible card game that sticks around. In K. Squire, C. Martin, & A. Ochsner (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Games, Learning, and Society Conference: Vol. 2*. Pittsburgh PA: ETC Press.

Adinolf. S. & Turkay, S. (2011). Collection, creation and community: A discussion on collectible card games. In C. Steinkuehler, C. Martin, & A. Ochsner (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Games, Learning, and Society Conference: Vol. 1* (pp. 3–12).Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press.

Costikyan, G. (1998). *Why online games suck (and how to design ones that don't).* The Cursor.

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. The MIT Press.

Xu, Y., Barba, E., Radu, J., Gandy, M., & MacIntyre, B. (2011). *Chores are fun: Understanding social play in board games for digital tabletop game design.* Think Design Play: The fifth international conference of the Digital Research Association (DIGRA), Hilversum, the Netherlands.

Zagal, J. P., Nussbaum, M.,& Rosas, R. (2000). A model to support multiplayer games. Presence: *Teleoperators & Virtual Environments, 9*(5), 448-462.

Acknowledgments