Well-played and well-debated: Understanding perspective in contested affinity spaces

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Introduction

The theme of this special issue, "Theories of Well-Played," reflects a new and exciting point for both the journal and the field of game studies. While the journal and the three previous Well-Played volumes (Davidson, 2009; Davidson, 2010; Davidson, 2011) have contributed to the body of principled analyses of how gaming experiences are shaped by the designed elements of games, there is still much work to do regarding its theoretical underpinnings. What does "well-played" mean? And who is "well-played" for? Game studies' unique mixture of approaches — designer discourses, rhetorical analysis, textual analysis, cultural studies, and applications — makes it appealing to step back and understand the ways that we, as academics and designers, can attempt to understand how a game can craft unique experiences for its players.

However, there is a missing piece that needs to be considered in the development of theories of how games are "well-played," and one that may interestingly connect the goals of game studies even more deeply with approaches to understanding online culture. I argue that to understand "well play," we may benefit from focusing not only on the ways that academics and designers analyze and understanding the systems of a game, but also by looking into the manners by which players engage with one another and with game designers in the interpretation

of a game's mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, 2004). The potential to connect "well-played" analyses to players' lived experiences outside the game is underexplored, and serves as the focus for this paper. I suggest that attention to the ways that game players conceive of their own activities with a game and the forms of identity play that these players engage with can contribute to a better understanding of their involvement in the ongoing assessment of what makes a particular game "well-played."

Toward this end, I address the forms of meaning-making that occur within a game's online community, connect those practices back to designed elements of the game under discussion, and then speculate on potential ways that the analysis and interpretation of a game can drive considerations of player's identity play in relation to the collective and competitive activity of evaluating a game. I attempt to bring into conversation two approaches to game studies that have not yet been fully integrated. Both share the common metaphor of space — a discussion of gaming affinity spaces (Gee, 2005; Gee, 2004; Hayes & Duncan, 2012) or the productive and contentious online discussions that occur around games, and a discussion of contested spaces (Squire & Jenkins, 2002) or a formal analysis of games in which contestation over virtual spaces is seen as central. Through the connection of these two notions of "space," I suggest that a productive synthesis emerges in which the consequential out-of-game activities of some games can be connected to designed elements of the games under discussion.

The synthesis of affinity spaces and contested spaces can help further our understanding of games not as simple media artifacts, but as media that are contested, negotiated, and often in continuing debate regarding their meaning(s). Discussions about games that focus on disagreements can be revealing, and help those of us interested in what makes a game "well-played" consider the contingent nature of interpretation and analysis. Ultimately, this paper will argue that the position-

ality of who is assessing a game matters, and is best understood when in conjunction with other positional interpretations of a game. What even counts as "the game" can change with contexts of interpretation, can change over time, and can change with considerations of the activities that take place in the contested spaces and affinity spaces of games.

Affinity Spaces

First, it is worth elaborating how and why the concept of the affinity space has become of interest to games scholarship in recent years. Gee (2005) coined the term as a way of leading educational considerations of gaming away from solely educationally-designed applications of games (e.g., the design of educational games such as Oregon Trail or the efficacious use of Math Blasters in a classroom), and toward a perspective that valued the "emergent culture" (Steinkuehler, 2006) of gaming. For nearly a decade, Gee's perspective has been one in which gaming affinity spaces — gaming discussion forums and resources for games ranging from Age of Mythology to Rise of Nations (Gee, 2004) to The Sims 3 (Gee & Hayes, 2010) — have been cataloged and described in qualitative terms.

In Gee's view, the classification of a "gaming community" has always been rather difficult, and perhaps fruitless. A boundary problem has been a great part of this; does one study the "communities" that manifest around only individual games, such as The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? Or, is the relevant "community" the fans of Eiji Aonuma's 3D Zelda games? Or all Zelda games? Or just "Nintendo fans" in general? Issues of membership are tough to assess in many online spaces around games (see DeVane, 2012), and the shifting, ad hoc nature of online gaming spaces makes it difficult to understand the utility of the term "community" for any of these media. Switching the metaphor to "space" rather than the problematic "community," Gee sought to dodge this problem and re-frame research on gamer activi-

ties as being about the elements of a particular environment that can give rise to interesting, productive practices within them. Gee (2005, pg. 225-228) preferred to list the potential features of affinity spaces rather than a set of definitional criteria, which included:

1. Common endeavour, not race, class, gender or disability, is primary
2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space
3. Some portals are strong generators
4. Internal grammar is transformed by external grammar
5. Encourages intensive and extensive knowledge
6. Encourages individual and distributed knowledge
7. Encourages dispersed knowledge
8. Uses and honors tacit knowledge

And so on, including affinity spaces' multiple routes to participation, status, and leadership. Gee's list emphasized the positive elements of engagement with online gaming discussions — again, certainly an emphasis that reflected his games-skeptical audiences of educational researchers and educational practitioners. And, with this, some branches of games and learning scholarship began to take much more seriously the productive nature of the online contexts around games, and the potential of games to include broader discussions of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006), as well as leading to empirical studies of what exactly goes on within them (e.g., Steinkuehler & Duncan's, 2008, study of informal scientific thinking practices in World of Warcraft affinity spaces).

However, in recent years, there has been concern over what the focus on the affinity space concept has told us both about learning within the online discussion spaces around games, as well as interactions between gaming fans. Is the concept only useful in broad descriptive terms? Does this focus give us a sense of how gamers craft understandings of the meaning of a particular game? New efforts have been taken

to both better identify the features of affinity spaces as well as testing the concept's utility in understanding other forms of media engagement. Recent affinity space studies have moved from documentation of gaming spaces to other media such as anime fan fiction (see Black, 2008), while a variety of methodological concerns (Duncan, 2010a; Lammers, Curwood, Magnifico, 2012) have been raised about how to best characterize the overall practices within these contexts in conjunction with accounts of individual moments of meaning-making. For gaming affinity spaces, the expansion and further application of the concept has been shifted to game design (Duncan, 2012), game modding (Durga, 2012), and how game playing spaces can foster designer identities (DeVane, 2012).

And so how we "expand the affinity space" has been a recent concern, and one relevant for this paper's discussion of developing theories of well-played — making the key assumption that one way to view a game's "well-played" nature is through how people discuss it. As the initial emphasis on play and resources found within affinity spaces has given way to a variety of concerns over what exactly players do in affinity spaces, we are left wondering whether or not Gee's initial picture of the affinity space is an unnecessarily rosy one. In our recent edited volume Learning in Video Game Affinity Spaces, Duncan & Hayes (2012) claimed that the pervasiveness of online spaces causes us to re-evaluate research on gaming's "elitist affinity spaces" that are "sites of very high knowledge production, … [and] tend to value a narrow range of skills and backgrounds, have clear hierarchies of status and power, and disparage newcomers who do not conform to fairly rigid norms for behavior." (pg. 11).

Focusing on gaming affinity spaces and online discussions, many of us understand that gaming discussions online can be contentious and often exclusionary (see Alexander, 2011, for a prominent games journalist's evaluation of "gamer" discourse vis-a-vis gender). Gee's frame-

work gives us a basic structure with which to understand the ways that affinity spaces provide opportunities for players to make sense of their gaming experiences, but is agnostic on the consequences of the forms of discourse present within them. In Steinkuehler & Duncan (2008), we found that some gaming affinity spaces presented a wealth of social construction of knowledge: Participants within the massively-multiplayer game World of Warcraft's Priest class forum worked through complex analyses of the Priest class's systems in a largely evaluative and collaborative manner. The World of Warcraft online forums represent only one affinity space, and one that we will return to in the course of this paper, but this study points out that affinity spaces are not just sites of productive activity, but sites of potential discussion. Understanding and evaluating more than any one individual's take on elements of the game's "well play" is a necessary task to both participating within and considering the implications of a gaming affinity space.

Steinkuehler and Duncan argued that the complexity of World of Warcraft's interaction of game mechanics was a key driver for the development of discussions in affinity spaces such as the Priest class forum, and this leads us to a consideration of the designed elements of the games that may give rise to such discussions. At the time, we did not include much discussion of many players' moment-to-moment in-game activities. World of Warcraft is not solely about theorizing about game systems, creating "builds" or "specs," but features actions in which players struggle against one another and the game's systems, including continual PvP battles between two player factions, organized conflict against game-generated enemies, and competition between individuals or guilds for in-game rewards. In order to more sufficiently address the ways that affinity spaces serve as contexts for meaningful discussions about a game's meaning, perhaps we should get a handle on the often contentious, conflict-oriented nature of many games, and what this emphasis might mean for the better understanding of "well play."

Contested Spaces

Continuing the metaphor of "space," I have recently found myself drawn to an older, short piece by Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins entitled "The Art of Contested Spaces" (Squire & Jenkins, 2002). Though other parts of Squire's and Jenkins' individual work have addressed the participatory culture of gaming (see Squire, 2006 or Jenkins, 2006b), their contested spaces piece was focused in particular on a new read of digital games as featuring struggles over spaces within a number of game environments.

Squire and Jenkins' argument provided a litany of digital games that featured spaces under struggle in one fashion or another, from Myst to Shenmue to Black and White. Their account addressed "space" in a variety of guises, including Wolfenstein 3D's virtual three-dimensional space full of enemies, and later elaborations of the first-person shooter in Doom and Quake; spatial exploration games in which the player progresses through a virtual space laid out by a designer, from Super Mario Bros. to Grim Fandango; and games in which a social space is negotiated, such as massively-multiplayer games like Star Wars: Galaxies and Asheron's Call. A major contribution of this piece was to frame the primary activity of the player in these varied spaces of games as working through environments that are contested in some fashion, be it space that a player is fighting over versus another player in a synchronous fashion (say, a Call of Duty multiplayer game), or a space that a player is working through versus a designer's plans (say, the narrative and space of an Uncharted game).
This work cut across a wide range of digital games, and cast the primary activity of gamers as gaining knowledge of game design as they play, incorporating insights from design into their play practices. Squire and Jenkins stated:

"As players engage more directly in the design process, the line be-

tween gamers and designers begins to dissolve. To fully participate, players will need to learn more about the art of game design. Effective game design can yield spaces that encourage our exploration, provide resources for our struggles for dominance, evoke powerful emotions, and encourage playfulness and sociability. This art owes much to previous traditions, including those of painting, architecture, and urban design, but it also takes advantages of the unique properties of emerging digital media. Games have always been an art of contested spaces; computer and digital games have pushed that art to a new level of aesthetic accomplishment."

And so, this navigation through a game-based metaphor of space is again argued as beneficial and positive, as was also seen in Gee's work on affinity spaces. We should acknowledge that Squire and Jenkins' argument is perhaps a bit overstated — many successful games do not literally include a virtual representation of contested space (e.g., Draw Something, Dominion), though clearly contestation is still at the core of such games. Additionally, we should consider that the selection of games chosen by Squire and Jenkins reflects the state of digital gaming in 2002 and may not fully capture subsequent, novel game mechanics, from music rhythm games (Guitar Hero, Rock Band, Dance Dance Revolution) to social networking games (Mafia Wars, FarmVille). Yet, there is an appealing connection to be made between a designed element of games (contestation over some form of space) and the practices that are negotiated and discussed in online affinity spaces. Are affinity spaces in some ways extensions of the contested spaces of games? Squire and Jenkins' assertion that the navigation of contested spaces yields an understanding of game design and "dissolves" the line between gamers and designers (ideas also explored by Duncan, 2011a), then it perhaps leads us back to considering the forms of contestation that arise in affinity spaces. If the line between gamers and designers is dissolving through play in contested spaces, how might the contestation itself play out within online discussions? And might

a consideration of "contested affinity spaces" help us to understand the ways that both game designers and game players co-construct the meaning of a game?

A Contested Affinity Space

Considering the intersection of contested spaces and affinity spaces, I present data here from a case study of contestation in one game's discussion forums: Debates between a game designer and game players in the official forums of the massively-multiplayer game World of Warcraft. This analysis is of course not meant to be representative of all games, and I do not mean to overstate my case through the presentation of just a small amount of data from one exemplary game (as some who have studied this much written-about game have done in the past). Rather, I see the discussions presented here as illustrative of the ways that contestation within the game might be reflected in the interactions between the game's designers and the game's players.

In 2009, as part of a larger study of design thinking in online affinity spaces (see Duncan, 2010b; Duncan, 2011), I collected data from the World of Warcraft official online forums (currently located at http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/). Focusing on the "Damage Dealing" forum — a forum for multiple classes of characters whose primary role in the game was in dealing damage to enemies, rather than healing or "tanking" — I investigated the ways that players interacted with the game's Lead Systems Designer, former marine biology professor Greg Street, known on the World of Warcraft forums by his screen name "Ghostcrawler."

For a franchise of this size (well over ten million players at the time), Ghostcrawler was an unusually omnipresent figure in the online forums, engaging with players on the game's continual design and iterative redesign, as well as policing conduct within the affinity space.

Ghostcrawler's deep engagement with players within the online forums presents an opportunity to see the ways that a game's lead designer and the players of the game co-constructed an interpretation of the gaming experience, as well as the role that the interpretation of this experience served in the broader mission of Activision Blizzard (World of Warcraft's developer and publisher). It should be noted, however, that I did not have access to Ghostcrawler or Activision/Blizzard's internal policies nor do I have evidence of Ghostcrawler's intentions outside of what was displayed online. The approach presented here and the strength of claims presented are somewhat limited in that this discourse interpretive method focuses on displayed online talk and activity (for both Ghostcrawler and World of Warcraft players in the official forums) and is not as yet supplemented with interviews with the participants.

Through a random sampling of threads in which Ghostcrawler appeared, I was able to cull a varied set of interactions between Ghostcrawler and a number of participants. Of particular note was one exchange between Ghostcrawler and a poster I'll refer to here as "Nawaf." Nawaf was a proponent of and user of a World of Warcraft add-on called Simulation Craft (or "SimCraft" for short). SimCraft was an open source data collection tool (currently found at http://code.google.com/p/simulationcraft/), which allowed player performance data to be collected across a number of individual players, and then collected into a central database for further statistical analysis. As a tool to support the understanding the game's systems, as well as a way to improve player performance, SimCraft was one of the predominant methods at the time for players. Rather than just intuit through individual play what the most efficacious approaches were for a damage-dealing player, SimCraft afforded players a collective effort to apply statistical and scientific methods toward reverse-engineering the game's systems.

In a thread entitled "Conflag changes on top of immolate?," a number of players and Ghostcrawler debated changes to a popular spell ("Conflagrate") for Warlocks (a damage-dealing class in the game) that had recently been "hotfixed, " or changed abruptly, by Activision Blizzard. Players advocated particular approaches for the company to take in how to conduct these changes to the game's mechanics, and argued for the use of data and conclusions drawn from the player data gathered via SimCraft. In the thread, Ghostcrawler expressed controversial statements on the use of SimCraft to make arguments within the affinity space, as well as statements indicating the "proper" place of tools such as this. A lengthy excerpt of his post follows (emphases mine):

I've commented on Simcraft (and any similar tool before) but I'll repeat myself.

1) It's awesome to see players dedicating that much effort to WoW. It really is. They show a passion for the game and dedication to improving both the player's effectiveness and the game in general. It is humbling in a way.

2) Those tools are very difficult to make. I'll give a shout out to Toskk's Feral spreadsheet, which represents an enormous effort and is still being refined constantly. Getting that kind of accuracy and precision for every spec in the game is going to be challenging.

3) As the community continues to offer feedback, refine and grow to accept Simcraft (or any tool), so will we. We aren't going to spend a great deal of our effort to troubleshoot or verify their assumptions. They are third party tools.

4) At the end of the day, the Blizzard designers are going to balance the game. Not the community. Not Simcraft. Not any external tool. If you want to use those numbers as part of your argument, that's awe-

some. But just posting those numbers and saying "Fix it," isn't going to work. I've said this a lot lately, but you should stop approaching every potential change as "What do we have to do to get you to make this change?" The answer is there is nothing you can do. You can give us information and we will use that information to make informed decisions. But we, not the community and not external tools, are going to make those decisions.

The highlighted parts of the post make clear that Ghostcrawler saw some utility in the use of SimCraft, but not for what many of the players were advocating. Many players discussed SimCraft as a tool to help them understand the game, but Ghostcrawler's reaction was one in which the tools were cast as useful only to provide "information" that could benefit the game's true developers, Activision Blizzard's World of Warcraft development team. The "community" was lauded for what it's done ("Toskk's Feral spreadsheet," a model for Druid play), but also it was made clear that there were limits to the activity in the affinity space vis-a-vis achieving goals that players might want.

As might be expected, Ghostcrawler's statements didn't sit well with many of the participants, who, to varying degrees, saw themselves as either contributors to the ongoing design of World of Warcraft or, at least, users of SimCraft who saw value in attempting to uncover the game's complex interaction of mechanics. For many SimCraft users, the tool allowed them to not just provide data for the designer, but to actively and collaboratively interpret the game. In one of many followup posts, Nawaf took Ghostcrawler to task for not sufficiently addressing the results that the population of SimCraft users had determined through the use of the tool, and the kinds of engagement with data that it represented. The following is a selection of Nawaf's post (emphases mine):

People perceive simcraft data as validation, much the same as people

my field (Quantum Optics) feel molecular dynamics validate their data. I'm not sure what kind of exposure you had to modeling in your marine biology PhD, but simulation data is often used and accepted in the academic community as tool for understanding the underlying effects of individual variables. Yes we're talking about toy models. But the same can be said for a great many "real" experiments in science. Model systems are also toys. The benefit of studying toy models through simulation, as opposed to studying them in experiment is that you so much more control over every possible variable. There's so much more data output that can be generated from simulations. The World of Warcraft really isn't that much different from the "World of Science". WWS and raid parses are similar to experiments performed on model systems. Simcraft data is analogous to molecular dynamics.

Nawaf's response is one that overtly discusses the activity of using SimCraft as science — quantum optics, "toy models," and molecular dynamics are all part of his argument. Contrast this with Ghostcrawler's framing ("third party tools," "external tools"), and we can see a member of the player community attempting to validate his argument through an appeal to another, privileged kind of activity which has at its central goal understanding of systems rather than the design of new ones. We see a clash between approaches here that may be illuminating for how we think of the forms of contestation within these affinity spaces: Is World of Warcraft "well-played" in different ways to the different participants in the space? Are we left with deciding whose perspective on the game is more worthwhile?

Contestation seems productive for not just revealing the players' theories of why World of Warcraft is "well-played" or, perhaps, in need of refinements to be "more well-played" in the SimCraft example. Focusing on moments of contestation allows us to see a distinct difference in the framings of the activities of the affinity space presented by both Nawaf and by Ghostcrawler: Nawaf argued for the affinity space dis-

cussions to serve as a form of "science" that meaningfully uncovers the systems of the game, responding to Ghostcrawler's argument for an "engineering" model in which players provide feedback to the game's designers to potentially improve the game. The contestation at the core of this particular affinity space interaction illustrates an interesting tension between the played experience (and analysis) of the game, apart from the designer's intentions.

And, of course, this discussion also reveals the different power relationships between player and designer, which are rarely acknowledged so clearly — Ghostcrawler, as an employee of Activision Blizzard, sought to stifle certain forms of discourse (criticizing the "science" framing) and yet reify what he saw as the commercial and true purpose of the affinity space (to provide feedback to designers and social support for players). Though this is only a short part of a much longer conversation on the validity of SimCraft's results, we can see a glimpse of how contested affinity spaces can provide an interesting context for which to study "ownership" of a game's broader experience. To develop accounts of how a game is "well-played," this indicates that we need to do more work to develop approaches that acknowledge how one's perspective on a game is shaped by one's position to the development of the game. Positions in a gaming affinity space do not exist in a vacuum; gamers and designers interact and forward their own approaches to understanding a particular game.

Finally, these sites of contestation between game designers and game players can reveal much in what one participant in the argument is stating, and what one is not. For Ghostcrawler, to understand how the game is "well-played" is a process that involves players as feedback resources, but relies primarily upon his (and his team's) choices and decisions. He does not refer to methodologies for analyzing the data, nor does he even refer to SimCraft results as data (preferring the term "information"). The game is understood as an Activision Blizzard

product first and foremost, and the engaged player's perspective is one that is "awesome," but ultimately unnecessary for the development of the game ("if you want to use those numbers as part of your argument, that's awesome"). An approach to understanding the "well-played" nature of World of Warcraft that defaults on the designer's understanding of the game may capture elements of its design process, but misses out on the persistent work and intellectual contributions that a player community may bring to understanding the game's systems.

For Nawaf, the game's "well-played" nature seems to have encompassed its flexibility to empower players to gather terabytes of data on the game's systems and give them a (potentially) consequential space to analyze and discuss it with the designer. And this is, of course, just the player's perspective on the game, and only a partial one. A theory of "well-played" that only takes into account the played perspective of a Nawaf is one that focuses on the player community's meaning-making as consequential and significant places for the players to adopt scientific practices (see Duncan, 2011a). But this would be one that is ignorant of the internal Activision Blizzard processes that give rise to these systems, and again missing a large part of the picture of how this game's experience is shaped. Considering World of Warcraft as a commercial gaming product, the game's design is not and never has been "owned" by its players, regardless of how much data and the sophistication of analyses players put towards it.

For both of these singled-out perspectives, the contested nature of the argument plays out within the social space of the game's affinity space, and an interpretation of "well-played" for World of Warcraft (at least the 2009 version of the game) is that the ongoing tension between designer and player reveals more than either individual perspective alone. The affinity space provides a public venue for practices to be advocated for by Nawaf and other SimCraft users, as well as a place for Ghostcrawler to attempt to communicate the means by which the game is

developed. It's a place in which a designer's view of the game (and the role of its affinity space) most clearly comes into public contact with perspectives of the game's players.

The push-and-pull of this interaction reveals more than just insights about the structure of an affinity space, I argue, it reflects something fundamental about this particular game. Developing a "well-played" for World of Warcraft cannot ignore that it is simultaneously a game that is continually iterated by its developers, and also a game that fosters intensely complex practices among its players. But, it is this interaction of the two — what drives the contested nature of this particular affinity space — that gives rise to an understanding of the way both perspectives shape our understanding of the game. The online fight is a contestation over space — in this case, the meaning and purpose of particular affinity space for World of Warcraft (and tools such as SimCraft) is openly contested, not by players versus players or players versus environments, but by players versus designers, customers versus employees of Activision Blizzard, and "scientists" versus "engineers."

Well-Played For Whom?

As one of the central concerns of the journal is furthering the understanding what makes games "well-played," we need to return to what a consideration of contested affinity spaces might allow us to understand about games that has implications beyond the individual case of World of Warcraft presented here. Contested affinity spaces are interesting and revealing regarding the approaches that players and designers take to discussing games, but do not appear for every game, nor am I arguing that a "theory of well-played" needs to necessarily investigate contested affinity spaces. Rather, I see several lessons that arise from the consideration of contested affinity spaces that help us to think more seriously about who determines how a game is "well-played."

First, one lesson is that a "well-played" account that does not address the experiences of multiple agents involved in the design and play of a game is clearly missing key parts of the picture. In an earlier "well-played" (Duncan, 2011b) paper on the game Minecraft, I attempted to incorporate the designer's perspective as seen through interviews, insights on the game's mechanics drawn from journalistic writing, the interpretation of the game by my students, by independent game designers, and, ultimately, myself. The differences in interpretation and meaning that each of these individuals brought to the interpretation of Minecraft was, at the time, merely implicit in the paper. In retrospect, there were tensions being explored between each of these interpretations of the game that I may not have been aware of at the time — Minecraft as open world sandbox for a new player; Minecraft as a prototyping tool for my students; Minecraft as a platform with which to develop new gaming experiences (e.g., Jason Rohrer's Chain World). I implicitly described multiple voices, but did not address how these perspectives interacted, nor how their differences were managed.

Through a look at contestation in affinity spaces, we can directly and easily witness these differences in perspective, and do something that I was unable to accomplish in my "well-played" of Minecraft: See what each constituency thinks of each other's interpretation. To date, implicit theories of "well-played" often rely on one individual's interpretation, and treat "well-played" as a textual analysis task first and foremost. It is my belief that this is generally a mistake — disagreements over the meaning of a game are not just different perspectives, but can illuminate the ways that games serve different roles for different people at different times and in different places. Disagreements, conflicts, and contestations are loci for us to employ in understanding how games are used in a variety of contexts, and the multiple forms of identity (e.g., gamers, designers, journalists, scientists, engineers) that are employed by those who engage with games. If Bogost (2011) is correct, and games are media whose interpretations should be owned

by "people, ordinary people of all sorts," then the future theorizing of how games are "well-played" necessitates an understanding of how individuals embodying many different kinds of "ordinary" interact with one another in the course of considering any particular game.

In sum, it is my hope through this brief paper that we can continue to think deeply about the ways that gaps between multiple discourses may be implicated in the forms of games we play, as well as how the activities of games may foster specific forms of meaning-making around them. Though the World of Warcraft case is but one small example of a contested affinity space, it yielded not just two perspectives, but an illuminating interaction of them that may foster an understanding of the developing tensions between multiple voices. While Squire and Jenkins discussed a "dissolving" of the line between player and designer, I argue that the key is understanding the process of "dissolving" — we need more nuanced ways of talking about participation in games than just unitary "player" and "designer" labels, and serious thought on conflicts between perspectives must be incorporated into future "well-played" accounts.

While the case presented in this paper is heavily oriented toward a specific moment in the history of World of Warcraft, there is nothing in this approach that is or should be unique to the understanding this game, or even to MMORPGs. I suggest that it could be productive to further investigate cases of designer/player contestation in commercial game contexts (e.g., the problematic 2013 release of EA's SimCity), in the open development of independent games (e.g., Double Fine's Kickstarted Broken Age), and to non-digital game contexts (e.g., the discussion of and iteration of homemade board game variants on boardgamegeek.com). And this approach could be levied to understand game-related discussions online in other contexts, perhaps extending the understanding of "designer/player" disucssions to other contexts such as "media critic"/"audience" contestation (e.g.,

the vitriolic reactions to Anita Sarkeesian's recent "Tropes vs. Women" video series). To fully dig into the complex task of Squire and Jenkins' "dissolving" between production and play requires understanding engagement across multiple games, multiple game genres, and multiple communities. It is my hope that this paper serves as an early attempt to do so, but also that it will not be the last.

I conclude with the hope that as we further develop approaches to understanding gaming experience and the meaning that players make of games, we can both critique and further the work on contested affinity spaces begun here. Understanding how a game is "well-played" cannot and never has been the sole purview of the designer, the critic, or the academic, or whatever label one chooses. We wear different hats at different times and in different contexts, and accounts of "well-played" games should not attempt to wish away the positionality of who is assessing a game, but understand it in relation to other interpretations. As we develop more nuanced understandings of how gamer discourse in affinity spaces serves to shape understandings of the medium, we need to pay close attention not to just each individual voice attempting to understand games, but to the interactions, arguments, and discussions between them.

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