Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
The 18th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

GAME ANALYTICS AND PARTICIPATORY EFFICACY

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Introduction

In 2009, a panel of players from the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *EVE Online* took the stage at a fan convention. They gave a presentation outlining what they had done in the past year to advocate for the interests of fellow players to the company that developed the MMOG. The panel was elected into their role as consumer delegates by players, through voting systems provided by the company. The panel defended their efficacy as delegates by presenting the percentage of issues they raised on behalf of their constituents, which prompted the company to redesign the game's mechanics, interface, or environments. A moderator hired by the company for the event emphasized the significance of the delegation:

> "There's a larger context to this: this is the first kind of democratic experience that has been developed by a gaming company or I think any kind of company to have elected representatives from within the customer base. So all those who vote … [are] participating in a social experiment, and I think you are kind of privileged to be the first participants in the embryo of the twenty-second century democracy."

EVE Online did not invent the use of democratic experiences in entertainment contexts. Hartley (2008) informs that audience voting in reality television formats are part of longstanding "plebiscitary industries" that include audience measurement firms, media monitors, and opinion pollsters, which sample, bundle, scale up, process, and re-present the demos to itself. Peters (2001) maintains that such quantitative forms of collective self-knowledge are vital to public spheres where geographical scale and social complexity exceed individual experience. *EVE's* consumer delegation is part of an ascendant form of democracy. However, this is less because of the delegation's vaunted electoral processes, and more because of their legitimation of "datafied" forms

Suggested Citation (APA): Chia, A. (2017, October 18-21). *Game Analytics and Participatory Efficacy*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from http://spir.aoir.org.

of collective self-knowledge that are not aggregated from players' opinions and choices, but are extracted from game analytics.

On the one hand, customer feedback such as user forums, surveys, and focus groups are established channels for consumers to communicate their sentiments to corporations. On the other hand, game analytics is a consumer research method that uses statistical analysis, predictive modeling, optimization, and forecasting to analyze telemetry data on player behavior gathered from game clients (El-Nasr et al., 2013). Digital games are inherently surveillance infrastructures, which have been repurposed by online game companies to gather information about player behavior directly from client applications (O'Donnell, 2014; Kline et al., 2003). Game analytics continues a long history of "commercial research" that has sought to rationalize production, sales, and distribution through household interviews, opinion polls, retail indices, and audience measurement (Elmer, 2003; Beniger, 1986).

Phenomenological feedback and game analytics are distinct regimes of knowledge that are leveraged by media producers and consumers for control over product development. How do consuming populations and governing corporations deploy these corroborating and competing regimes of knowledge towards a kind of "citizen efficacy": the influence and impact of citizens over the governance of their society (Taylor, 2006)? Within civil society, citizen efficacy refers to how the "will of the people" translates into binding collective decisions about how matters of public concern are defined, prioritized, and resolved by governments. Mechanisms for citizen efficacy in democratic regimes include elections, referenda, and public discourse. Within MMOGs, this can be interpreted as participatory efficacy: how the collective will of participants translates into changes to game architecture, rules, or content. MMOGs are non-linear media forms that change with every fix, update, and expansion (Humphreys, 2005). These changes have social, political, and economic ramifications for *EVE's* fractious player groups, who vote to have their interests represented to developers.

This paper demonstrates how consumer delegates represent their constituents by using the logics of game analytics to translate player interests into representative samples for the game publisher. This paper argues that "representativeness" operates as a boundary object (Star, 2000) in delegates' player advocacy and corporate consultancy, in order to provisionally realize the founding vision of co-creation. This is a vision of mutual benefit from relations of increased dialogue, transparency, access, and accountability between consumers and corporations (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2005), which is usually unevenly realized (Banks, 2013). The uneven realization of co-creation is further skewed by consumers' asymmetrical access to game analytics as a regime of knowledge for citizen efficacy. The interpretive flexibility of "representation" allows delegates to mediate inconsistencies of meaning that reside in the social worlds of players and developers. At the boundary between consumer research and political representation, game analytics provides shared standards of scale and objectivity that synchronizes the goals of corporate efficiency and participatory efficacy.

Method

This argument is based on the qualitative analysis of meeting minutes from biannual summits between consumer delegates and developers of *EVE Online*, a space-themed MMOG with over half a million subscribers. Over a thousand pages of minutes have been published over seven years of summits. Delegates are sponsored to attend these three-day summits with development teams that are held biannually at the company's headquarters in Iceland. The publication of these summit minutes (with redactions to protect trade secrets) fulfill a conditional promise of transparency and accountability the company made to its players. Instead of staged acts, these minutes are analyzed as performative documents that are linguistic means of world-making. This analysis is supplemented by developer interviews and participant observation at two fan conventions, which are supplemented by video recordings of the convention's events over an additional four years, promotional texts, customer relations communications, and press reports.

Significance

This study foregrounds the mounting political stakes of algorithmic opacities and information asymmetries as media analytics dominate the way publics come to know and talk about themselves. Participatory and citizen efficacy relies on deliberative processes, which are weakened by these opacities and asymmetries that now dominate mediated forms of public discourse. Boundary objects such as "representativeness" must be clarified in popular as well as public culture, in order to discriminate intentioned discourse from datafied proxies of intention.

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