

Truce in online games

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a study examining the nature of rules in the online multiplayer game modification Defense of the Ancients (DotA). It was found that players use numerous truce calls (categorised broadly as fainties, parlay, pax and cheap) to negotiate rules or the maintenance of 'fair play' in a game. The possibility of providing feedback on the use of truce calls to developers as part of the design process is also considered.

Author Keywords

Game Studies, Defense of the Ancients, DotA, rules.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this project is to gain an understanding of the nature of rules (both programmed and socially negotiated) in playing computer game modifications (mods) in games without in-game umpires or referees. Of particular interest are the terms and approaches employed by players to negotiate rules and rule changes during a period of game play, and the situations in which such negotiations arise. The overall project also aims to understand how these negotiations of rules interact with the ongoing design process of online games and hence to learn important lessons for game designers in general.

In examining the nature of rules, this study focuses on the game Defense of the Ancients (DotA). DotA is a very popular user developed modification of Blizzard's game Warcraft III (Blizzard, 2003). Warcraft III is the real time strategy (RTS) predecessor to the heavily analysed Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) 'World of Warcraft'. DotA is still being played by a very large player base many years after its release which makes it a compelling subject for research.

DotA can be broadly classified as a tower defence game in the fantasy genre, played by ten people at a time on two teams. Each player controls a single character which attempts to destroy the other team's base while defending their own.

Game mods such as those of DotA allow users to actively negotiate the programmed rules of a game and thus engage in the design process to a degree. Changes and additions are often debated by players over the course of multiple versions of a game. DotA has a highly enthusiastic player community and the negotiation of which rules to play by or bend can be very passionate and extended. DotA has gone through many versions since its creation with the community actively participating in the process of deciding which modifications to make and which to avoid.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on the initial phase of the research, a grounded analysis of game replays and initial interviews with players.

The study began with a grounded analysis of publicly available recordings of DotA. These recordings are posted on websites by players and viewable through the 'Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne' application. Information on forums and the websites surrounding the posts were also used in the analysis.

Ten replays of DotA have been thoroughly analysed using a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and were selected on the basis of their rich interactions and coverage of known negotiated rules. Each replay lasts roughly 50 minutes and each was downloaded from one of the two largest international DotA related websites. A further 10 replays, which were selected on the basis of their coverage of the emerging themes of the first 10 replays, have not yet been fully analysed.

Text communication between players was extracted from the replay files using a PHP script based on Juliusz Gonera's code (see <http://w3rep.sourceforge.net>).

The themes which emerged from this analysis fed into discussion topics for interviews with players of the game. Participants, chosen for their experience with the game, were interviewed about their general game playing background, history playing DotA, current thoughts on DotA and any involvement they may have had with the development process.

Interviews, which generally took less than an hour, were (at the participant's discretion) supplemented by the researcher's observation of a normal session of play or by replays which the participants felt elaborated on themes discussed during the interviews. The interviews and observation occurred at a time and place of the participants' own choosing but were, where possible, done in the location where the participant normally

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played the game. The full process was audio recorded for later analysis. Finally, follow-up clarification questions were sent via email if required.

Eight interviews with players have been conducted to date consisting of two females and six males from five different countries. Future participants have been recruited through snowballing; these interviews are yet to be conducted. It is expected that 15 interviews will be sufficient to reach data saturation; if necessary, this number will be increased.

Of the participants interviewed, four came from a group of players who play together at a local residential college of the University of Melbourne; some members of this group also play online. The other four participants played together while undertaking the same software engineering course but have since moved or taken jobs and begun online play. Future groupings of participants are drawn from older demographics which interact solely online.

3. EMERGING THEMES

During the initial phase of the study, a number of themes have emerged, facilitating some tentative conclusions regarding design implications, player behaviours and comments on existing work in the field.

3.1 TRUCE CALLS FOR NEGOTIATION

When coding the replay data, the code 'barley' was initially used to label one player's use of "afk", ("away from keyboard"), a communication made apparently because some real life situation had interfered with his/her playing of the game. The term 'barley' is, in the Australian context, a word often used by schoolchildren in games when they need temporarily to stop playing in order to tie up a shoelace or because some event has interfered with their ability to continue playing. This code was then expanded to include other events such as the situation of a player's mouse becoming stuck.

As the code expanded to include more and more varied situations in which a respite from game play was requested, literature on the barley term was sought. One description of terms such as barley was conducted by Opie & Opie (1959) a pair of UK folklorists, whose study 'The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren' found the widespread use of what they called "truce terms", during children's games:

"...when a child seeks respite he uses a term to which there is now no exact equivalent in adult speech. If, when engaged in some boisterous activity with his fellows, a child is exhausted or out of breath, or cuts himself, or has a shoelace undone, or fears his clothes are getting torn, or wants to know if it is time to go home, he makes a sign with his hands, and calls out a word which brings him immediate but temporary relief from the strife." p.141-142.

The original 'barley' code of this analysis was then changed to 'truce call', reflecting the fact that specific terms or larger exchanges between players were used to request respite. As more replays were analysed, it became clear that the 'truce call' coding could be applied to a

large number of varied player interactions. This theme was then reconsidered and through further analysis it became clear that there exist at least four categories of player negotiation which involve truce calls. These categories have been labelled for the easy identification of different negotiations. Most of the labels were inspired by the original truce terms identified by Opie & Opie but should only be seen as labels and have little relation to their original usage in 1950s England. Some problems with the original work of Opie & Opie were found during this stage of the research.

There appears to be an underlying assumption in Opie & Opie's work that the use of truce terms is limited to children: *"when a child seeks respite he uses a term to which there is now no exact equivalent in adult speech"* (p. 141-142). Opie & Opie even go as far as to call the use of truce terms "juvenile" and a legacy of a "primitive" past when medieval knights offered opponents 'barley'. In 'The Ambiguity of Play' (1997) Brian Sutton-Smith described and criticised what he called the rhetoric of play as progress, that is, the idea that children adapt and develop through play activities, *and that this does not apply to adults*. He argues that any play theory is limited if it only encompasses the progression of children and that any understanding of play or definition must be inclusive of adults.

The data collected to date in this study, supports Sutton-Smith's criticisms, in that it is clear that play involving truce terms for negotiation is not limited to children, but occurs in online game play involving adults. It is also clear that, contrary to Opie & Opie's general stance, requests for respite need not involve any specific 'magic word' (e.g. afk). However, differentiating the terms shows that many of the calls for truce (though their wording has changed) retain the same function and usage as those specific calls identified by Opie & Opie.

On first consideration, it may seem that truce calls have been made redundant within digital games with the invention of the 'pause button', which provides for an enforceable 'time-out'. However, truce calls within this study are not to be understood as a simple game mechanic for stopping and starting the game, but instead as method of allowing for negotiation of the rules participants are to play by in games. A child playing tag, for example, may be surprised by another coming from behind a tree and *retrospectively* use a truce term ("nuh-uh, you can't tag me, I was barley"). Alternatively, the pace of a game may slow or major plays may cease in some areas of play but not others while a point of order is discussed and negotiated.

Emerging types of truce terms

What follows are the categories of truce terms found thus far in the study.

The first theme emerging from the data was labelled *fainties*. This theme might be deemed the 'traditional' time-out, and is used to pause the game, or a space of the game, in order to maintain an agreed level of fair play. It may also be used as a retrospective call to negotiate whether a past event should be considered a part of the

play that is being enjoyed. Examples used by players in DotA include, afk, apologising in some way for a 'fail' and emoticons such as: / -.- / .

The second major truce term theme was labelled *parley*. To call parley is to request a negotiation with others on how to proceed with play. This theme was particularly evident in the discussions in the 4th replay analysed. During this game, a player on team one had left the game (presumably because of a software crash), another player on team one went afk and a player on team two was consistently performing poorly. As the game progressed and more players left the game, a discussion occurred as to whether the game should continue or whether some players should change sides to make the match more balanced and fair. This was a perfect example of a parlay situation.

A further example of *parlay* relates to the DotA specific rule of backdooring. In DotA players attack and defend their bases. An attacking team follows a kind of natural order of destroying outer defences first and working their way towards the end-game goal of the destroying the core of an enemy's base. This is done with the aid of wave after wave of non-player controlled characters. It is possible to avoid this natural order of destruction to varying degrees. The term backdoor refers to sneaking into the base through the backdoor as it were, without confronting the obstacles at the front gate. It is *parlay* over how far removed a certain act is from the perceived natural order of play that causes the most heated negotiation. Usually, when a player believes a backdooring has occurred under their definition of the rule they will call 'backdoor' in order to indicate they expect the activity to stop or reasons why the action is fair within the context of the game being played. It would appear that the call of "backdoor" is close to an Opie & Opie type 'magic word' – it is widely recognised and it could even be said that it has attained the status of a lore within the context of DotA.

The third truce call initially centred around players' use of the term 'gg', meaning 'good game.' When a player believes that a game has reached a point at which the outcome is inevitable, he or she will usually call 'gg' as a way of indicating that the game should be concluded rapidly by the other team. The request (which can be made by either side) is concerned with the etiquette of allowing one team to fully 'win'; it negotiates the speedy achievement of that end, and as such can be thought of as an orchestrated playful forfeit. This theme was eventually labelled *pax*. However, the use of such *pax* terms in online games may not in fact end the game; rather, it may be a signal to allow for a rearrangement of the game structure to allow for a return to balanced competition. Examples of this latter situation would include requests for transfer of players from one team to another in order to balance the teams. The use of 'gg' could, like 'backdoor' be considered a truce term in the traditional sense (i.e. a word which has become lore in a given community) and occurred in the majority of replays analysed.

Whereas parlay and pax are usually concerned with social rules, the final category of truce terms is primarily concerned with what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) term the operational rules of the game (e.g. programmed rules).

This final category of truce calls identified to date is the call of *cheap*. The term (a common one in online game playing) is used when a player believes that an element of the game (such as a sword, a strategy or a certain combination of characters) provides an unfair advantage to the player using it. Plays which are 'cheap', that is, are exploitations of the game's mechanics, are nevertheless considered to be detrimental to its fairness. Common expressions used in this category are 'imba' (imbalanced) and 'nerf' (the brand name of a soft ball) meaning that something has been made weaker. A call of cheap indicates, perhaps more strongly than any other term, that there is something wrong with the operational rules of the game and a player wishes to negotiate the exploitation of a game mechanic. The call of cheap was most often reported by participants when a new hero or item was introduced into DotA.

The truce calls discussed above (*fainties*, *parlay*, *pax* and *cheap*) are all used by players when they wish to negotiate a breach of a social rule or call a social rule into action. They are all, therefore, concerned with the maintenance of 'fair play' in a game, and appear to have evolved to cope with the various situations which may arise to disrupt fair play.

It must be noted, finally, that the categories described above are not mutually exclusive: overlap exists, and there is a notable degree of interaction between the terms. The degree of interaction and the complexity of the interrelation of the truce calls will be the subject of future analysis.

3.2 SPOILSPORTS AND STIGMATISATION

According to Lin and Sun (2005), 'white-eyed' players are those who are seen to disrupt the experiences of other players and appear to gain enjoyment from such acts. Foo and Koivisto (2004) broadly describe this behaviour as 'grief play'. Lin and Sun's study of MMORPGs in Taiwan argues that these disruptive players are often imagined to be (and stigmatised as) junior high school students. Initial data from this study appears to support this finding in new contexts other than Taiwan.

The study has in addition thus far found that the stigmatisation of junior high school students is not just limited to acts of grief play where the disrupter enjoys the act. Instead, the stigmatisation can be made when there is an overuse of the truce call *fainties*, as described above, where a player appears to be simply "taking the game too seriously" or even where there is an overuse of the cheap call which can be imagined as immature and "whingy." This sentiment was found most often in interviews with players rather than in the analysed replays.

3.3 TIT-FOR-TAT AND TRASH TALKING

Overarching the use of truce calls for the negotiation was the idea expressed by interview participants that a social rule such as *backdooring* could be broken conscience-free

if the other side broke the rule first. This tit-for-tat play impacts on both the degree and nature of negotiations undertaken by players.

Some study participants also indicated that the use of 'trash-talking' (name calling, abuse or Lin and Sun's stigmatisation) could influence their adherence to established rules in the game of DotA and their willingness to negotiate or engage in parley with the other team.

It should be noted that some truce calls may double as trash talk: for example, 'gg', normally used as a pax, may be used in an ironic way as a rude or jocular reference to the failings of a player – the suggestion being that the play is so poor that the game will soon be over. The same term may also be used as a fainties when a player feels that he or she is responsible for their own poor play.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the initial phase of research, this study has identified various truce calls used by players of online games. The emerging themes of fainties, parley, pax and cheap are all used to call for some sort of negotiations relating to what rules should be played by to allow for an enjoyable, fair and even "fun" game.

At this early stage of the research, based on the data collected and the analysis presented in this paper it is suggested that the frequent use of truce calls may help to indicate or identify some problem in the design of what Salen & Zimmerman (2004) call the operational rules of a game. Situations in which players frequently cry fainties, parlay, pax or cheap, can alert developers to look for flaws in the game's design. Identifying truce calls which become truce terms and eventually lore can also be useful. Currently, the 'patching' of games and the development of mods is a time consuming and very ad hoc process; closer attention to and understanding of player negotiation might allow for a more efficient design process. However, such a suggestion must be limited by the proviso that the passionate debate over what rules to follow is sometimes (and certainly in the data gathered thus far) part of the rich and enjoyable experience of games; designers should not automatically alter the operation of any situation which gives rise to debate.

It is suggested that games might profit from including mechanisms to let developers know which truce calls are being used, and about which rules and situations. Such feedback could go some way towards democratising the process of game patching, or at least informing the decisions of developers. More research is required in this area and the exact problem domain is yet to be determined. Subsequent stages of the study will address these issues.

The next stage of the research will involve interviewing player groups who are more involved in the development process of DotA. The distinction between player (user) and developer is not as clear-cut in game mods as in traditional software development. Some mod players may do beta testing, provide artwork, translate in-game text

for foreign language versions and/or provide feedback among other activities but still consider themselves players rather than developers. These activities make for a very large development base.

Postigo (2007) has dealt with the motivations of the developers of game mods which appear to be not entirely dissimilar to the motivations of open source software developers set out by Raymond (1999). Game developers actively encourage mod creation as it is a desirable activity (Sotamaa, 2007). However, the motivations and activities of the players and interactions with developers has not been explored. Individuals involved in the development of DotA will also be asked about their play experience as well as the development process they go through.

There will be players in the study who do no development work in the traditional sense and simply play the game. However, it is argued that this play is part of the ongoing negotiation of the rules of the game and hence part of the development process.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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