Secret Knowledge

4-6 minutes

A few days ago, Sesame Street's Twitter account tweeted out the Konami Code. If you use the code on Sesame Street's home page, then… well, I won't spoil it, but give it a shot if you're curious.

It reminded me of the secret knowledge culture of gaming (the Komami Code being perhaps the most representative example of this culture). Every (good) game from my youth had the game itself as the main dish, and then a side dish meta-game would emerge in the secret knowledge around the game. Cheat codes, passwords, boss patterns, re-dizzy combos, easter eggs, and other hidden artifacts inside games became collectively became secret knowledge, shared partly by word-of-mouth, partly via gaming magazines (Nintendo Power, Gamepro, etc), and partly in the barely budding internet pages you'd find if you got lucky enough with a WebCrawler search to stumble onto the right Geocities fan site. Sometimes secret knowledge is designed intentionally as gameplay (craft recipes in RPGs), sometimes it's bugs and glitches ("skips" in game maps), other times it's marketing (the warp whistle in the adver-movie The Wizard), and still other times it's a developer communicating directly with his/her audience (the first easter egg ever, in Adventure). The result ends up having a similar effect in all cases: Secret knowledge of a game is both a currency (meaning: fungible and a value exchange) and common ground (shared experience - like a fraternity house secret handshake).

Robin Sloan wrote one of my favorite blog posts from last year (/ht to Andy Weissman on the source) describing the value of secret knowledge in Minecraft. Robin perfectly captures the secret-knowledge-as-meta-game phenomenon in this paragraph:

> Minecraft-the-game, maintained in Sweden by Persson's small studio, is just the seed, or maybe the soil. The true Minecraft (no italics, for we are speaking of something larger now) is the game plus the sprawling network of tutorials, wikis, galleries, videos—seriously, search for "minecraft" on YouTube and be amazed—mods, forum threads, and more. The true Minecraft is the oral tradition: secrets and rumors shared in chat rooms, across cafeteria tables, between block-faced players inside the game itself.

And then Robin goes on to explain how all the most important web services of the future will have to build a similar secret-knowledge-as meta-game layer in order to be successful… because lacking this layer would leave too much value behind. Rather then butcher his message through my paraphrasing, just go read his post.

Some examples of secret knowledge in web services today:

- **Google** (remember the first time you found the calculator one-box? Do you use even one tenth of these power user tips?)
- **Apple** (ask Siri "Where are planes above me?")
- **Twitter** (What do the "@" and "#" in a tweet mean? Twitter never explained or even intentionally designed at the outset… it just emerged as a peer-to-peer secret.)
- **Snapchat** (most of the interface lacks affordances, it's all swipes and press-to-hold without explicit labeling, which is inpenetrible to parents and lingua franca to kids)
- **Indeed** (there is an entire search engine for salary comp trends, completely overlooked by most users)
- **Etsy** (search by color! Useful? not really… but so delightful as a buried secret.)

That word "*delightful*" in describing the hidden corners of Etsy is key. A characteristic of well-executed secret knowledge is that it must be conversation worthy. Finding esoteric features inside iOS settings menus to help you better manage your notifications does not count as secret knowledge. Managing notifications in iOS is painful, not delightful. Secret knowledge should be a brag, a conversation starter, a hard-won product of experience. Knowing how to muddle past a product designer's poor decisions doesn't count as secret knowledge.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list (and contribute far better examples in the comments); the purpose to spur you to think about how deliberate use of secret knowledge will both (a) make your

product better and (b) help cultivate a community around your product.