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ABSTRACT

We describe a narrative case study of a free-to-play, massive multiplayer online role playing game through virtual ethnography inside the game as player and passive, participatory observation of the official game forum to understand the actions of both, the developer and the player community in relation to subliminal development changes of the game rules. We then show that players are able to claim agency and change the course of the game design while trying to allocate themselves as both, consumers within a heavily commercialized game model and invaluable members of the gaming community itself. We draw from studies on player agency, game co-creation as well as research on free-to-play game design to demonstrate how a developer constantly undermines player agency through an ongoing re-definition of the game rules disrupting the magic circle which is the main contribution of this study. Our discussion outlines the constant struggle of players to level the playing field within this damaged magic circle which is punctured by casino-like game reward mechanisms, in-transparent development notes, deceptive developer implementations and game modifications in the context of the freemium business model of game design.

Keywords

disruption, developer ethics, fairness, free-to-play, freemium, frustration, game design, magic circle, player agency, player frustration, power, rules

INTRODUCTION

Massive multiplayer online (MMO) games are on the rise. The 2014 Global Games Market Report by independent video game market research and analytic firm Newzoo valued the revenue generated by massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) in 2014 at 81.5 billion dollars and estimates to generate 102.9 billion dollars in the year 2017 (Newzoo, 2014). Standard features in these games include collaborative gaming in groups, integrated social functionalities and active exchange and community management by the developer through forums, Twitter, Facebook and other social media. Browser-

based free-to-play (F2P) massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) with social features, such as guilds, ladders, and competitive play are popular due to ease of access, cross-platform and operating system compatibility. Additionally, F2P games offer an immediate and rewarding progress and achievement structure, which can be amplified and accelerated through micro-payments as part of the freemium pricing strategy and revenue model of game design; in stark contrast to traditional subscription-based games, colloquially referred to as pay to play games (Lin 2011; Seufert, 2014).

We used virtual ethnography and participatory observation to study the impact of a relatively small player community, active in both, the game itself and complementary internet forum, on the overall game design and development course of KingsRoad (Rumble Entertainment, 2016a), a browser-based MMORPG. Eight months of virtual ethnography as a non-paying player enabled us to experience numerous changes in the game design first hand. We then select five representative instances where Rumble Entertainment - in the following referred to as the developer - implemented game changes which were perceived detrimental by the players in the official game forum (Rumble Entertainment, 2016b). Not merely tell these changes a compelling story of a competition between the players, but rather a continuous power struggle between the top players and the developer as well. As a result of this, we highlight how the developer is constantly changing the rules of the game which causes anger, frustration and feelings of unfairness among a dedicated core community of players in KingsRoad.

In parallel, the leading author experienced these changes as a non-paying player and observed the community creating strategies and taking action, such as boycotting general gameplay and staging strikes with the aim of reverse-engineering what it perceived as unfeasible developments. The diverse observations range from simple allegations of the players directed towards the developer, for instance calling out unjust gameplay changes or accusing deliberate foul-play through deceptive design and implementation tactics. We also found that initially implemented changes were reverted if they were not critical towards the developers' economic interest and if there was sufficient opposition in the forum and community. This illustrates a dangerous balancing act for the game developer in the middle of meeting business goals, maintaining a healthy gaming community and considering ethics while trying to avoid to alienate their own player base.

In this qualitative study, we explicitly outline these development changes in the game system and the in-game economy which are perceived as negative in the player community through selected forum threads and players quotes. The selected game updates led to strong reactions in the observed forum, in particular from experienced, veteran players. For instance through virtual protests and petitions, these players were able to force the developer to revert previously implemented changes, or at least to provide compensation measures for what they perceived as unfair changes. We characterize these reimbursements as both, the developers' accommodation efforts to restore peace within the player community and to a greater degree, the protection efforts of the company's most important revenue source, the customer base.

Our research question considers how players cope with this two-faced gaming infrastructure; which is on the one hand promoting player participation, feedback and collaboration and on the other hand concealing gameplay changes through poor transparency and communication, discriminating unrestricted player discussion and obstructing player criticism. We recognize how players escape this malicious infrastructure and gather in safe zones (ex. social networking sites) outside of the

corrupted arrangement. At the same time, we witness how the players converse at will on the limitations of KingsRoad and confront the developers without the fear of repercussion. To mount their argument, some players appropriate cloud- and web-based applications to reverse-engineer parameters of the game and collaborate to create micro-knowledge bases, such as wikis and spreadsheets. The result of this crowd-sourcing is subsequently presented in the game forums as a form of evidence and means to mount an argument against the developer. Our results and discussion give an overall account of the aforementioned players' strategies within a disrupted magic circle of game design and rigged infrastructure wherein players equally, try to claim agency on the game design and hold the developer accountable for unjust changes.

RELATED RESEARCH

Free-to-play games
In contrast to the subscription model of MMOGs, F2P games provide a pricing model where the user pays no entry or usage fee. F2P games acquire revenue through selling virtual props and equipment. According to Paavilainen et al. (2013), there are two benefits to the F2P model. One is that players can access the game through multiple price points by distinguishing gamers by their willingness to pay for additional game content. Two, F2P games allow for more diverse player segments because of the ease of access into the game. F2P games are commonly associated with social network games (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014; Burroughs, 2014) and also provide developers opportunities to tweak game mechanics to continuously seek ways to monetize the game experience (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010).

Recent research on F2P games has also highlighted the disadvantages to the player's game experience. Lin and Sun (2011) observed that many of these problems related to the reduction in game quality, lack of fairness, loss of game balance and the disruption of game immersion (magic circle). With respect to F2P social network games, Paavilainen et al. (2013) determined that players considered social games and virtual goods as vices, monitored purchasing behavior to avoid addiction, and disliked that virtual goods provide unfair advantages (p. 809). Although there are some advantages for players participating in F2P games, there is far more evidence of player frustration with respect to the assumptions of the magic circle: rules, fairness, agency, and immersion.

Magic Circle
Game studies scholars have placed great emphasis on Huizinga's (1955) conceptualization of the magic circle, a bounded space of play that is set apart from normal life. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) further extended the concept defining it as a *"special place in time and space created by a game"* (p. 79). The magic circle is not an impenetrable boundary and many factors may disrupt the perceived immersion in the game world. However, as Consalvo (2009) contends, the magic circle is heavily dependent on the context. In this regard, context encompasses the player's real life desires, goals, and expectations. Context also includes the game platform where players bring in their own assumptions and knowledge of the game experience. For example, it is commonly understood that MMO players average 20 hours a week or more in gameplay time thus discouraging casual gamers (Consalvo, 2009, p. 413). Nonetheless, with the rapid rise of F2P games, MMO experiences can now attract both hardcore and casual gamers in this new game development model. The freemium pricing strategy and model also brings with it certain disruptions to the magic circle. For example, F2P games introduce significant complexities to the fundamental assumptions of the magic circle.

Among F2P gamers, Lin and Sun (2011) found that senior gamers described free games as inflicting *"damage on magic imagination, game immersion and fun"* (p. 280). For instance, players who bought virtual items must acknowledge to themselves that their achievements are not "real". Players who refuse to buy virtual goods always perceive that they can never overtake the "rich guys". In addition, taking time to calculate transactions using real world currency will interfere with the player's gaming experience. Even F2P players must acknowledge the economic nature of their gameplay by the constant notices to exchange real world and virtual currency for valuable in-game items. In line with Paavilainen et al. (2013) demonstrating among others as well the disconnect between the magic circle and the F2P game experience, KingsRoad as a F2P social network game, is a prime example of a monetization structure through continuous special, time-limited offers, deal pop-ups and notifications of sales within the game.

Player-centric games studies

Recent research in game studies has emphasized the value of player-centered approaches for understanding the social and economic contribution of video games. As opposed to structural approaches that view games as mechanisms that feed player experience (Juul, 2001), player-centered approaches place player experiences and activities at the center of video game studies. As a result, studies have analyzed the use of cheats and walkthroughs to assist players (Consalvo, 2007), guild formation (Castronova, 2005) and modding practices (Postigo, 2007). Player-centered approaches advocate a return of agency to the player which Behrenshausen (2012) links to the active-audience model.

However, player-centered approaches risk engaging in the same type of determinism that is inherent in structural approaches to game studies. As a result, Behrenshausen (2012) sees video games as an assemblage. This perspective privileges a configurative process that accounts for *"human and nonhuman bodies, algorithmic logics, circuitry, enunciations, marketing discourses, juridical codifications, mythic narratives, architectural formations, affects, flows of both electricity and capital"* (p. 882). It is within this assemblage where we observe the complexity of markets, players, game structures and the developer and situate our case study of KingsRoad.

Co-creation of games

Seeing players as co-creators of games follows a long line of research that acknowledges the importance of user-generated content and innovation as significant developments for cultural and economic gain (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008). According to Banks and Potts (2010), motivations that explain the rationale for users to engage in co-creative practices range from intrinsic cultural motivations that emphasize communitarian spirit (Benkler, 2006) to extrinsic economic motivations that seek market gain (Ross, 2009).

However, Banks and Potts argue that it is best to study player co-creation as a co-evolutionary process between market and culture. To this end, their ethnographic study of a failed MMOG revealed the importance of the social network market, a place that lies in between market and cultural contexts. A social network market exists when rational consumer choices are made not entirely through price signals but through the social information signals of the behaviors of other agents (p. 263). As a result, social networks play a significant role in shaping market demand and this is particularly relevant for online gaming (Castronova, 2005; Williams, 2006). The player as co-creator agent *"seeks both economic opportunity and the social status and intrinsic rewards earned from participation in social networks"* (Banks & Potts, p. 265). Game companies thus

recognize these active co-creators and seek to engage them as preferred consumers. As players accept these invitations, they may demand levels of engagement, collaboration, and participation that game developers are not comfortable with nor have appropriate business models to account for these player practices, our case study of KingsRoad gives an account of this kind of unwanted player participation.

Player motivation, rewards and goals

Intrinsic player motivation and the role of achievements, rewards and goals in MMORPGs has been studied as well, for example the recent notion that casual games can provide easier access and advanced reward structures to encourage players to take on roles in non-violent games (Begy, 2011). McGonigal's (2011) detailed account on the topic identifies types of "work" players invest in online games and general game requirements for a positive interaction, namely goals, rules, a feedback system and voluntary participation. We find this type of work in KingsRoad being diminished by frequent game changes and updates of the mechanics, rules and reward mechanisms causing player frustration and irritation.

METHOD

The authors used two qualitative methods; virtual ethnography to familiarize themselves with the MMORPG itself and participatory observation to further understanding of the players' reactions in the associated developer forum. We present a summarized narrative of players' forum posts and quotes to describe a chronological course of selected, but significant, developer changes in the game mechanics and economy and the following reactions of both veteran, high-end players and new, inexperienced players. This gives an account of a continuous and bare knuckle negotiation between player interest and developer goals. In particular, the players would like to realize a fair and enjoyable game while the developer aims to create a continuous challenge with the purpose of both, attracting new players and maintaining older players in the game.

Virtual ethnography is a variation of ethnography that takes place in cyberspace or a virtual social environment (Daniel, 2011; Banakou, 2009) as exemplified by Bonnie Nardi's influential World of Warcraft study (Nardi, 2010). To become acquainted with KingsRoad as a game, the leading author played KingsRoad as an archer character. The leading author never conducted a micro transaction to buy virtual good with real world money, therefore taking on the role of a non-paying player. The leading author played at least once every other day. Sometimes the gameplay consisted of simple logins to collect achievements and bonuses, and other times the gameplay lasted for an hour or two while the overall time of active gameplay lasted for eight months, from August 2014 to March 2015. Active gameplay enabled us to understand and experience the game system and mechanics, such as an embedded casino-like reward system through lock-boxes providing varying amounts and qualities of currency or equipment. Moreover, the leading author could experience the game character progression and cooperative play with guilds participating in events, tournaments and leaderboards as well as changes in the game mechanics and rules over time.

Simultaneously, we read in the official game forum taking the role of a passive observer. The forum is the main tool the developer uses to communicate design changes, updates and announcements to the community (Rumble Entertainment (2016b). Users need to register to post new threads or post responses to existing threads while a log-in is not needed to simply read already existing messages. In the forum, the community-

interaction and community-developer interaction was observed and analyzed over a time period of 17 months from October 2014 to March 2016.

During this time period, we experienced and observed significant changes to the gameplay system which are outlined in a chronological narrative. The forum discussion and quotes provided in our results provide an account of the player resilience and resistance which ultimately affected the game development course and documents an ongoing demolition of the magic circle of play and game design. We observed players' coping mechanisms, frustrations and various means to express their discontent with changes through fast and immediate reactions in the forum intended to either i) appeal to the developer to reverse the implemented changes, ii) to rally the community to create pressure on the developer or iii) to generate virtual protests and petitions. This is a secondary finding and contribution of this study.

However, our main results indicate the violation of the magic circle of game design in F2P environments and therefore, the diminished agency of the player base on the development course of the game. Our discussion outlines player and community strategies to resist these changes and inversely interpreted, shows the developer strategies with the aim to escalate the time spent in the game by players for profit maximization.

Purposive sampling of forum posts

The KingsRoad official game forum consists of eight sub-forums which cover game-related topics ranging from "General Discussion" to "Bug Reports" as well as a "Thread Graveyard". We select our five cases based on a purposive or judgmental, nonprobability sampling of the forum threads and associated gameplay changes experienced while playing the game. In particular, we purposely selected threads which caused an upheaval within the community demonstrated by the higher than average posts per thread in comparison to the average posts per thread in general, see Table 1.

KingsRoad sub-forums		Threads	Posts	Average Posts per Thread
1. Feedback		186	5273	28.34946237
2. General Discussion		244	2860	11.72131148
3. Content Discussion		18	495	27.5
4. Guides and Tutorials		62	1663	26.82258065
5. Find new Friends		68	783	11.51470588
6. Bug Reports		176	1428	8.113636364
7. Forum Feedback & Support		31	135	4.35483871
8. Thread Graveyard		3930	35334	8.990839695
Totals		**4715**	**47971**	**10.17412513**
Cases	**Duration**	**Threads**	**Posts**	**Average Posts per Thread**
Case 1: Doomsayer belt fiasco	Oct – Nov, 2014	2	207	103.5
Case 2: Changes in champion difficulty	Dec – Jan, 2015	3	718	239.33
Case 3: Attack speed nerf	May, 2015	2	252	126
Case 4: Double price of event token lockbox	June, 2015	1	974	976
Case 5: The developer bot scam	Sep – Mar, 2016	2	303	151.5
Totals		**10**	**2454**	**245.4**

Table 1: Total KingsRoad Forum statistics as of May 9, 2016, the selected five cases of this study and the approximate duration of the threads being active.

The selected five cases were posted initially in "News and Announcements" (as of now outdated due to a recent forum redesign), the "Feedback" or "General Discussion" sub-forums and then automatically moved to the thread graveyard. We acknowledge and discuss the limitations of this sampling approach in the latter part of this paper. In Table 1, "Duration" refers to the approximate time the threads surrounding the cases were active. An active thread refers to a thread with no posts older than two weeks. If a forum thread does not receive new posts after 14 days, it is moved to the "Thread Graveyard".

Research ethics
All information for this study, such as individual posts, usernames and data is publicly available in the developer forum (Rumble Entertainment, 2016b) without prior registration. Within the game itself, the first author was simply a normal player, within the forum, the authors followed the evolving threads without any intervention. As all data publicly is available in the forum, we did not need to apply for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this project. To ensure some degree of obscurity, we decided to anonymize the user names of our quoted posts but cite the posts as written. However, we do understand that the quotes we provide can be potentially back-traced to the individuals who posted them, we believe they give a necessary and unfiltered account of our observations and findings and are invaluable for this study.

CASE STUDY ON THE MMORPG KINGSROAD
KingsRoad is a Flash and browser-based MMORPG developed, management and published through Rumble Entertainment (2016a) and was initially released in March 2013. In late 2014, the developer received funding from major venture capital investors Google Ventures, Khosla Ventures and global game developer and publisher Nexon (Rumble Entertainment, 2016c). In early 2015, KingsRoad was released in the ITunes and Android Play stores as dedicated apps. KingsRoad is cloud-based and playable through the official developers' website through various web browsers (Chrome, Firefox, Internet Explorer) and is embedded in various browser games hosting websites (Facebook, Yahoo, Kongregate). KingsRoad supports cross-platform gameplay; for example a player can use an iPad to play the game and later switch to a Personal Computer and resume playing the same character with a similar account.

Among social features typical for MMORPGs, such as three player party play and guild functionalities, the game features micro transactions of a virtual currency called Gems for real world money, weekly and daily leaderboards for individual players and guilds as well as daily bonuses and achievements, obtainable by simply logging into the game. Hence, all game content is theoretically accessible if players spent enough time in the online world to gather enough premium currency through rewards and achievements, most end-game content is faster and easier obtainable using the in-game premium currency or by means of instant micro transactions. In consequence, we can characterize KingsRoad therefore as a F2P game bringing together paying and non-paying players.

KingsRoad includes both casual game characteristics and continual gameplay mechanics, aiming to attract new and veteran players. Casual game characteristics (Kultima, 2009) include easy accessibility through Facebook games. The game mechanics are fairly simple for a MMOG (for example a limited number of keyboard shortcuts) while providing generally forgiving gameplay experience. The main goal in the game is to gain experience and to level up one or all of three playable characters, an archer, a knight or a mage in an isometric 3-D medieval, fantasy world. The players are able to kill monsters and complete quests to gain experience, gather better items (Loot) and standard (Gold)

and premium currency (Gems). KingsRoad offers an in-game shop where players can engage in micro transactions to buy virtual premium currency (Gems) for real world money and then high-end items for Gems. The KingsRoad developers utilize the recently introduced micro transaction based Freemium pricing strategy and business model (Seufert, 2014; Hayes, 2008) instead of the traditional, subscription-based model as seen for instance in World of Warcraft. According to Forbes online Magazine (Kain, 2014), the future MMORPG markets will be characterized as casual, accessible and F2P utilizing the easy to learn, but hard to master principle. KingsRoad is a F2P game with a strong emphasis on optional micro-transactions to streamline the player's character development or acquire new items. Hence, in theory all game content is available and obtainable through regular play, our case study show how players extensively used micro-transactions and invested real money to win certain items.

As of May 2016, the official KingsRoad Facebook page had 1.1 million likes (Facebook, 2016), while the official KingsRoad Twitter account had 12.200 Twitter followers (Twitter, 2016). Various unofficial sub-communities around the game, such as guild Facebook groups or cheating websites co-exist online. However, the official forum is the primary and accountable tool the developer uses to communicate with the player base (Rumble Entertainment, 2016b). We are unable to give a precise number of active forum members, but estimate that 100-250 active users at any given time post regularly (at least once a month) and seem to have a significant impact on the game development.

Player-Developer conflicts
During eight months of KingsRoad gameplay and 17 months ongoing observation of the official forum the leading author observed significant changes to the game's economy, game rules, play system and difficulty adjustments. These changes were noticeable in the game and commonly not announced or vaguely announced by the developer. This is contrary to other MMORPGs transparency patterns, such as World of Warcraft, Diablo III or Path of Exile, which all post a detailed developer changelog on their respective forums, called "Patch Notes" (for example: Grinding Gear Games, 2016).

In the following cases, we describe and analyze in a narrative fashion five changes observed in the game design which caused reactions among the player community in the official game forums. These cases show the continuous negotiation between the developer and the player community and give an account of the deconstruction of the magic circle over the course of 17 months. Each of the five cases is connected to a significant game change or update and created at least 200 posts per case in the official KingsRoad forums (Rumble Entertainment, 2016b).

Case 1: Doomsayer belt fiasco (Oct - Nov 2014)
In October 2014, the developer released an update which introduced new equipment slots for the in-game characters; namely two earring slots and one belt slot. Together with these new slots, the announcement stated that players would have a chance to earn an exclusive belt obtainable only through a time-limited competition in the weekly leaderboards and by placing in the Top 100 players for three consecutive weeks, and in the Top 3 for the best quality belt. The community was divided about this update. One group expressed concern that the developer introduced items only obtainable by paying players who compete for the Top 100 leaderboards while the usually more silent group, the top players, stayed rather quiet on this issue. The tournament started with the standard three week window and the thread became inactive in early December 2014, after discussion on the introduction of the new items and who would actually be able to obtain

the rarest nine belts ceased. During the last hours of the three week tournament, the developer made the belt available for purchase in the in-game shop for premium currency, not made known to the community. That meant that at this specific point in time, every player was willing to make the purchase could buy the rarest quality belt, which had been previously described as an exclusive item only obtainable through the tournament leaderboards. Within hours, player Uleras posted a second thread titled *"Doomsayer Belt in Shop ....thank you Rumble."* in the forum. Uleras was in a Top 3 Guild in KingsRoad which had regularly ranked in the Top 10 consecutively during the course of observation. It is very likely that his guild (among other top placing guilds in KingsRoad) regularly competed for the weekly leaderboards and was highly organized, disciplined and likely invested a lot of time and money in KingsRoad. Uleras posted:

> *"You guys at Rumble, you think you doing "business" with brainless people and also you think you are smart by being cunning? Rumble you showing us that among other things you becoming very greedy. Why belt was not from the beginning on the market? You thinking:" let them pay for 3 weeks and a few hours before ends we releasing the belt in Shop", but no, you will disguise it with: "after a lot of complains/demands we released the belt in shop to make happy our customers and be able to get it more people". most of people spent more Gems than it cost now in shop, just to be in the top 100, also millions of gold spent to fuse score jewels, not to mention the time to farm gold and jewels."*

The player signed his post with his full name and guild association. In the following discussion, players commented on the release of the belt in the in-game store for premium currency disclosing that they were the group of paying players who competed in the tournament for the Top 100 places in the leaderboards in the last three weeks. Foxsmith wrote for instance:

> *"I just checked the shop and can't believe my eyes. Are you out of your minds? People worked hard for those limited items and now after tournaments and arenas are done you are just gonna put them in the shop so u can get some extra money. How greedy can u get."*

Players further expressed their anger and disappointment, such as Airdan, who wrote:

> *"[...]NOT SO, NOT a little frustrating [...] I will not play this game any more. What Rumble did tonight is just way beyond what I can accept. I have been playing the tournament -- and winning it -- for 3 days at a crazy rate. Not sleeping, hardly eating, in order to stay at the top with players pushing like mad from below. At the cost of some 190,000 Gems. And so have Ugazor and Solenor. BECAUSE THERE WAS AN ARTIFACT BELT AT STAKE, and because it could be obtained nowhere else. And you guys put up the belt in the shop at 5,399 Gems only 2 hours before the tournament ends? Now what kind of respect is that? At that price, we could each get 35 of your belts! This is far worse than anything I've ever seen in this game. We are not going to score a single point any more. You made us feel ashamed of playing a competition which should have been an enjoyment. May Rumble feel ashamed too, for offering us such disappointment, and*

In early 2015, the price for 6000 Gems on Facebook was $49.99. At this point, it is obvious that players spent way more time, energy and premium currency to enter and play the tournament as often as possible to gain the exclusive belt, not knowing that the developer would change the rules and release the belt in the in-game shop hours before the tournament ended, for 5399 Gems premium currency obtainable for everyone, an hour later dropping the price to 3849 Gems. Subsequently players posted screenshots of the shop as a form of evidence in the thread. Other players were entertained by this development as the belt was advertised as unique and highly desirable and only obtainable by a small group who could invest vast resources. Players started to request a correction of the developer. The thread developed further until Airdan posted a screenshot of a private message between her and the developer in the public thread which included an apology and announcement to remove the belt from the shop as soon as possible as well as to provide special make-up rewards for the Top 3 players of the last 3 weeks tournaments leaderboards. The community was now extremely upset and user Ximbris re-posted the announcement of the Belt by the developer and after the disclosure of the private message from Airdan, the developer apologized publicly in the thread, announcing free upgrades to the Top 3 players of the 3 weeks leaderboards and removed the belt from the shop. However, players who did not place in the Top 3 but within the Top 100 leaderboards of the tournament continued to express their frustration. The developer reacted again with an apology and gave upgrades to all Top 100 players of the 3 leaderboards. Both threads created a combined 207 posts. The developer apologized multiple times, removed the sale of the item in the shop, and upgraded the Top 3 and later the Top 100 players of each week with higher quality belts.

Case 2: Changes in champion difficulty (Dec 2014 - Jan 2015)

On December 8, 2014 the developer releases version 1.14 of KingsRoad. Among other updates, the developer adjusts the difficulty for champion monsters in story maps to a new scaling. Playing story maps on champion difficulty is the main way for players to gather resources, also known as gold farming. Gold is the main free obtainable currency in the game. With gold, players can buy event tokens to play events. The leading author and his guild, for example, regularly farmed champion maps to accumulate gold in order to play time-limited event maps, which, after each successful completion, offer the chance to receive a random, high-level item. However, the developer did not adjust the monster gold revenue with the update effectively rendering gold farming on story maps much longer and cumbersome. This change caused a massive player outcry in the developer forum as it effectively reduced the gold-per-minute income players could achieve when farming maps.

Player Ophiel commented on the change: *"Takes 3x more time now to farm same amount of gold in KR […]"* while user Pureheart added: *"So it was true. Thanks Rumble for making farming 3x more of a grind."*

Players made calculations of the expected losses and additional time they would have to spent to earn gold and play events, while the developer tried to mediate the situation describing changes that could be made. Zuriel commented further that:

> *"this update is equal to a 50% nerf in gold not per map but per min twice as long to complete map = halve as much gold per min [...]...I am now in a top guild and half of people here are on about quitting"*

In addition to massive opposition, protests, boycotts and demands to force the developer to reverse the changes, players announced their intent to play another game. After a lot of opposition to the changes, the developer promised to observe and address the issue if necessary. After two days, on December 10, 2014, the developer released a hotfix adding gold scaling to address the community resistance. We observed similar patterns in related forum threads on this case, such as players announcing their intention to quit KingsRoad or players posting evidence in form of YouTube videos to show the detrimental change. Furthermore, players posted boycott narratives of themselves and friends quitting the game due to dissatisfaction, or state the intention to not buy any premium currency until the changes are fixed and that economic reasons are the sole drivers of this change of the developer. In total, we count an accumulative of 718 posts in three threads related to this case. The developer implemented a change to adjust the gold drops of the monsters on the champion level due to player dissatisfaction, resistance and boycott.

Case 3: The attack speed nerf (May 2015)

On May 8, 2015 user Elia posted a thread with the title *"Decreased Attack Speed"* expressing concern that his archer had lost a significant amount of attack speed and asking the community if they had experienced a slower attack speed on their characters as well. After assuming that internet lag was the reason, the community found that all players with an attack speed of a certain proportion were facing the same change. Players demanded a statement from the developer and moderators as for example Elia's post exemplifies: *"Still looking for answers @Developer"*, similarly Yeoman posted: *"A comment from Rumble would be nice."*

On May 11, 2015, a moderator replied that they would investigate the issue confirming later that day that in fact attack speed was hard-capped at 200%, not known to the player community. The community started discussing this change and became irritated as shown in previous instanced. For instance, Players proclaimed a slow death of the game and blamed the developer for punishing long-time players for economic reasons and monetization strategies. For example, Wagrog wrote:

> *"As some have said..this is vaporware. Once management decides to close up shop, many players will be left empty handed. All of us who have put time into playing this game will be taken for fools. Better to accept this possibility sooner rather than later. Rumble is making a last push to make as much money with all these festivals with ridiculous rewards that are now nerfed. Read between the lines and find alternatives."*

The community demanded explanations and reminded the developer that there would have been a lesser impact on the community if the change had been announced. On May 12, 2015, an actual developer posted an announcement in a new thread fully reversing the change. After an explanation of the issue, the developer admitted that they had made a mistake by not informing the community beforehand as well as by not having a long-term strategy to fight the stat inflation in the game, a general problem in MMORPGs and KingsRoad. The community was thankful and proactively explored the problem of attack speed and general stat inflation in the following discussion. Both threads concerning this case accumulated 252 posts, the developer fully reverted his initial implementation.

Case 4: Double price of event token lockbox (June 2015)

On June 11, 2015 the developer rolled out an unannounced update effectively doubling the gold price of the event token lockbox in the in-game shop. As mentioned earlier, farming gold to buy event lockboxes is crucial for most players. On the same day, June 11, Player Ludius opened a thread in the forums called *"OMFG..... they DOUBLED the cost of the token lockboxes".*

The discussion started at a pace not observed in any of the previous cases. Players were upset, and showed similar patterns as seen in previous cases. A moderator replied on behalf of the developer stating that he was not always filled in about the game updates and announced the developer intent to rebalance the virtual gold economy in the game with this update. Players demanded direct communication with the developer and CEO about the issue and publicly announced and started virtual protests and boycotts.

On June 12, 2015, the thread reached around 300 posts, and the moderator reported to the community results of a conference call with the developer. Aside from minor adjustments, the moderator forwarded the developer decision to not reverse the price increase. In response, the community continued to resist and oppose the game update, for example Bloodbane recommended that players:

> *"1) Dislike the KingsRoad Facebook page; 2) Address the issue on Twitter and their respective social networks 3) Write negative reviews on the Android and ITunes app store 4) Disclosure of game exploits."*

Players are upset to an extent that the moderators have to delete too offending postings. Over the time period of one month, this thread created 974 posts, a magnitude not observed in previous cases.

Case 5: The developer bot scam (September 2015 - March 2016)

In September 2015, the developer updates the game to version 4.0.0 and among other updates, introduces i) dragons as pet's for the players, ii) a dragon village with new resources to both, upgrade the dragons and the village as a whole new side game and iii) a raid functionality to fight other player's dragons to acquire their accumulated resources. The community welcomes the additional content and high-level players soon start to realize they are being raided continuously for a large amount of resources at times they are logged out of the game hence having acquired the best dragons, and therefore the best defenses possible. Soon afterwards, the described issue is being revealed as a secretly introduced bot scam from the developer. Through using available in-game statistics, a so-called raid overview, the community finds out that the players who raided them in absence de facto do not exist. Player Talbot starts the first thread called *"We raid bots in dragon battles! [Proof inside]"* stating that *"we don't fight actual people and steal their resources, we fight randomly generated rumble bots and they raid us that means doesn't matter how strong our dragons are, rumble can make us lose as much as they want."* Shortly after, Tristan posts screenshots of raid overviews of his account and subsequent friend request sent to those players who raided him: *"Here is the actual proof by screen shots."*

Other players send friend requests in a similar fashion to the players who raided them and can reproduce the similar results: *"Guys. It is robots - there is no doubt. Whenever you send a friend request and use a real name, it is sent, but these names do not exist. I was*

not raided before so often but RG robots took about 130,000 silver from me only today - I was raided 4 x today. And the days has not ended yet."

The moderator replies: "*The raid system/feature itself is not yet finalized. Yes, there are some bots in the system at the moment."* Soon after, the developer claims to have the bots removed but according to players now secretly introduced a "tax" on every raid between players conducted as detailed by Anvid:

> *"They basically removed the bots, and found a different way to steal the resources. Give the raider very little, and take a lot away from the person being raided. Right there looks like:1.8% for the winner, 98.2% taxes, Nothing to say."*

As of May 2016, two threads concerning this case created a total of 303 posts while it is still unclear in the community if the developer uses bots or collects a so-called raid "tax".

DISCUSSION

In our eight months, respective, 17 months of playing KingsRoad and observing the forum, we witnessed significant game changes which caused anger and frustration in the player community. This was shown in opposition and boycott calls, expressed through dropout stories towards new, perceived detrimental updates and by holding the developer liable for invested playtime or labor, resources and money. In our study of the five selected cases we saw that the community was able to force the developer to reverse changes in two out of five instances, was able to force the developer to adapt one patch in two cases and did not succeed in receiving compensation within, or modification, of the game of any kind in one case. The results of our case study demonstrate two recent developments in game studies and shed light on a third, new pattern.

First is the emphasis on player-centered approaches. Our research found that players have agency to further their own cause that is supported by their expert knowledge in the game as well as the literacies, skills and competencies. Following Behrenshausen (2012), we also note the agency of the game developer who could restructure the game in ways that benefitted some players at the expense of others. For example, in the case of the Doomsayer Belt, it is arguable to what extent F2P players benefited from eventual developer accommodations, especially in consideration of the vast amount of time and effort initially spent by veteran players to acquire an exclusive item and the subsequent frustration and disappointment after the game changed, making that item obtainable through the in-game shop. As a result, the developer trivialized the F2P players' investment of resources (time and effort). In this regard, we observed the limits of player agency where game structures represented the *"raw materials player's appropriate in order to reinterpret a video game, to thwart the intentions of its designers, and to wrest control of it from capital"* (Behrenshausen, 2012 p. 877).

Second, our case study also depicted the struggle between market and culture. KingsRoad represents a social network market where economic systems co-evolve with cultural ones. The case study reveals the developer changing allegiance toward the P2W player experience. In this way, the developer justifies changes to the game rules and structure by appearing to draw more heavily on market logic. Players responded to these game alterations with calls to their own socio-cultural motivations. As a result, player co-creation involves multiple "games" occurring in both economic and cultural contexts involving *"new cultural practices, new business models and other institutions that*

govern and regulate these exchanges" (Banks & Potts, 2010, p. 266). Banks & Potts (2010) contend that one of central reasons for the failed MMO game was that implicit contracts between game developer and player co-creators were not made explicit. Thus, the authors conclude that implicit contracts remain a black box and an opportunity for future research. We believe our paper represents an attempt to look into the black box and foreground the implicit contract between developer and player.

Third, a reason for these failed contracts is the questionable ethics of the developer as exemplified in our case study of KingsRoad repetitively breaking the magic circle. Consalvo (2009) argues that the magic circle is not a boundary where one is inside or outside but rather a space of fluidity and grace where players bring in their real lives, commitments and expectations. However, our study has also found that developers need to be a part of this construction. Consalvo focuses mainly on players who appropriate cheating as a defiant act reflecting their own frustrations and limitations. Yet, what about developers who also appropriate questionable strategies to monetize the gaming experience? Social network game developers are likely to maximize profit as outlined by Alha et al. (2014, p.10) who found that *"aggressive monetization, paywalls and pay to win are the usual faults of the model."* This represents an unethical usage of the F2P game model. This is in contrast to the negative perception of these practices found in their interviews of 14 F2P professionals who mostly view them as *"the marks of bad (or past) F2P games"*. Our findings agree with Consalvo in the sense that the magic circle may not necessarily be broken but perhaps made more elusive by both player and developer agency. As noted by Paavilainen et al. (2016), the free-to-play model is *"currently undergoing a process of domestication"* being pushed by both gamers and developers toward a more stable gaming form. Even with this in mind, one can still inquire as to where is the boundary, however flexible and fluid, between player, game and developer?

Limitations
We claim no quantitative results or potential generalization of our case study to other MMORPGs, but rather are able to show how a small community of engaged and active players in the developer forum was able to resist imposed changes, reverse implemented game updates due to specific strategies and close monitoring of the developer actions ultimately holding them liable in cases they felt treated unfairly. We also acknowledge that we observed instances where the developer-community dispute resolution was successful and updates and game changes welcomed and approved by the community. Also, we do not know the absolute number of players in KingsRoad, or the absolute number of participants in the official forums, but it is obvious that a very small group of players is able to participate in the design by claiming agency for the silent, much larger group lurking in the forums or just playing the game.

FUTURE WORK
Acknowledging the limitations of our case study and selective sampling, we would like to analyze more deeply the strategies players employ in the KingsRoad forum to increase their overall understanding of the game. An investigation of community's research on the game mechanics to create more transparency would be one endeavor and go hand in hand with examining the social media sites and computer-supported collaborative work tools in use, for instance complex Google spreadsheets or YouTube videos of playing strategies.

Also, we would like to connect our findings to real work analogies to potentially map the online resistance behavior and adaptation strategies of the KingsRoad community to real world instances, such as the corrupted blood virtual disease account which spread in

World of Warcraft and was found to share similarities to real world epidemics (Lofgren, 2007)]. Future work could also study similarities of community resistance and methodologies in the real world similar to the KingsRoad virtual community.

Finally, a qualitative content analysis of our forum dataset to track sentiment, to create a gamer ontology or to understand the player characteristics in an unobtrusive approach could shed light on the coping potential of the players and turning point, such as instances players give up to resist, give in the change, or abandon the game as a whole.

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