

GODS OF OLYMPUS – AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: *Market – General Specifications and Game Features*

Chapter 2: *Attacking – General Overview*

Chapter 3: *Attacking – The Gods*

Chapter 4: *Attacking – Playstyles*

Chapter 5: *Defending – General Overview*

Chapter 6: *Defending – Base Design*

Chapter 7: *YouTube Tutorials – Base Poppin’ Series*

Chapter 8: *YouTube Tutorials – Pop to the Top*

Chapter 9: *YouTube Tutorials – Back to Popping*

Chapter 10: *YouTube Tutorials – Event Solution Videos*

Chapter 11: *YouTube Tutorials – Player Channels*

Chapter 12: *Gods of Olympus – An Auto-Ethnographic History*

Chapter 13: *Alliance: Firesmoke*

Chapter 14: *Approach to Ethnography: Virtual Persona*

Chapter 15: *Alliance: Firesmoke Players*

Chapter 16: *Alliance: General Survey*

Chapter 17: *Alliance: Finding a New Home*

Chapter 18: *Alliance: Sloppy Seconds*

Chapter 19: *Alliance: Sloppy Seconds Players*

Chapter 20: *Alliance: Co-Leadership*

Chapter 21: *Alliance: Alliance Wars*

Chapter 22: *Alliance: Coming Home*

Chapter 23: *Alliance: The Rough Sex Show*

Chapter 24: *Alliance: Legends*

Chapter 25: *Assisting: “Playbour” in Gods of Olympus*

Chapter 26: *Assisting: Alliance Ideologies*

Chapter 27: *Playstyles: “Play Approach”*

Chapter 28: *Achievement: How to Win at Gods of Olympus*

Chapter 29: *Veteran Skills*

Chapter 30: *Dark Play*

Chapter 31: *Necessary Fixes*

Chapter 32: *Possible Additions*

CHAPTER 1

Market – General Specifications and Game Features

Gods of Olympus is billed as a real-time, build-and-battle mobile strategy game, and was developed by indie studio, Aegis Interactive. The game released an alpha version in 2015 which involved roughly one hundred test accounts. The beta launch of the game released for Apple devices in January 2016, and the October 2016 update made the game available for Android devices. The game is currently celebrating its second anniversary.

At the beginning of December, 2016, Aegis announced Gods of Olympus (“GoO”) had registered its millionth player. There have been only nine major updates during the two years of the game’s existence online, and many players have voiced their concerns about the slow-paced rolling-out of new features, new content, and rebalancing tweaks. My own survey work has revealed that the game is fading in interest with players generally, despite having incredible technical sheen at the level of 3D modelling and animation, as well as having hundreds of extremely dedicated players in the core community.

The average age of the core community and most heavily invested players is very high with most of us being in our thirties. Many players have informed me that they play GoO while their kids play the more popular, Clash of Clans (CoC) or Mobile Strike. The older age of players has the negative side-effect of making GoO gameplay videos virtually non-existent on social media websites. “KeaGirl” did an abbreviated Twitch TV livestream session for GoO in 2017 but she has remained primarily dedicated to Clash of Clans. I am not aware of other Twitch streamers for GoO. Aegis Interactive maintains an official YouTube channel for the game, while there are less than a dozen players who regularly post gameplay videos for Gods of Olympus at YouTube. The core community is highly dedicated to the game, but recruiting new players to join has proven difficult.

Currently, GoO has a 4.6 rating at GooglePlay based on 173,000 respondents, while the AppStore registers only 695 ratings averaging out to 4.6 also. This discrepancy is odd, to say the least but may reflect ratings for only the most recent version of the game at AppStore. In January, 2018, AppStore listed Gods of Olympus as its two hundredth most popular strategy game while GooglePlay listed the game as its hundredth most popular strategy game. There remain over a dozen similar games higher in the listing, with Clash of Clans having the lion’s share of downloads and being ranked seventh in GooglePlay strategy games and eighth for AppStore.

At the official Gods of Olympus website, some key features of the game are highlighted which distinguish GoO from its competitors: no build times, full combat control, unique reward system, and real-time cooperative play. These features were intentionally geared to address the particular negative aspects of Clash of Clans gameplay.

In CoC, every new defense structure takes time to build and while it is being upgraded it is not available during player base defenses. Once a player has progressed in CoC, a defense upgrade may take over a week to complete, and it can be very discouraging to have invested in-game resources on a structure which is useless for a long period of time. The same is true for offensive units when upgraded. GoO has no build times and the upgrades (which cost gold or stone, or can be bought with gems when the player lacks those basic resources) happen instantaneously.

In CoC, a player “cooks” an army which is highly customizable across more than a dozen unique attack units, however the cooking process takes time and once an attack unit is dropped on the map during battles they are AI-controlled and will often have a mind of their own with respect to which defenses are targeted and in what order. In GoO, the attacking player has full control of their roster of “gods” and can move them individually or together using a ‘move-all’ button (which incidentally did not exist when the game first released). With that said, two of the newer gods that have been added to the game (Hades and Poseidon) have their special power as AI-controlled monsters (Cerberus and Kraken, respectively). These AI-controlled monsters are randomizers during attacks and will target on proximity (Cerberus) or totally randomly (Kraken). In addition, assist units and god-summoned units are AI-controlled once they have entered the map. However, it is the playable gods that control the pace of the attack therefore full combat control of gods by the player has a significant impact on standard gameplay.

In CoC, a player has their collected and stored loot exposed to attackers, and players will lose elixir, dark elixir, and gold (in-game resources) based on the success of attackers against their base. This can be very discouraging for players who find that saving-up for a new upgrade becomes a rollercoaster ride of frustrating ups and downs, twists and turns. A player may log off the game while having almost the amount of “loot” needed for an important upgrade and when they come back online their base has been attacked several times and they will require a run of attacks to regain the lost treasure (which can take several hours when cooking armies). Supercell, who developed Clash of Clans, likely find this discouraging system to be advantageous financially as players will end up spending in-game currency to purchase the missing resources to achieve an upgrade immediately. Players will also spend real money through in-game currency to cook an army faster or hurry up the building process. In that respect, there is no “flaw” in the CoC model from the standpoint of the studio, although arguably, players are actively being manipulated and toyed-with in underhanded ways.

In GoO, the player never loses their accumulated resources and there is no raiding of treasure by opponents. Attack victories are rewarded with stone (an amount based on a fraction of the stone that was put into the base which is defeated) and gold (always half the amount of the stone awarded). Even a defeat when attacking is rewarded with partial amounts of stone and gold based on how much of the base’s defenses were destroyed. Conversely, defenses are rewarded with a more modest amount of gold than when attacking, yet no stone. The gold corresponds to the strength of the gods who are

defeated on the battlefield. Theoretically, there would be no gold rewarded to a defending player if the attacker's gods took no damage during a victory against that base. In GoO, there is a constant sense of progress on developing the strength, health, and powers of gods through unlocks and upgrades, as well as building a more robust and secure base through adding and upgrading defense structures.

The final feature which distinguishes GoO from CoC is that GoO has real-time cooperative play. In CoC, a player attacks bases on their own and the opponent is not able to defend their own base. GoO is incredibly dynamic in its mechanics and social in its gameplay where any ally (up to 100 players in an alliance) can enter an attack or defense in order to not only view the battle but to assist with a variety of unique units. Allies can often save a player that would otherwise be defeated on their attack or defense. In fact, with Gods of Olympus, assisting is the key to setting new high records in personal trophies. Also, personal trophies impact the trophy rating of alliances, therefore cooperative play has a cumulative effect on the success of an alliance. Once you have played GoO it is difficult to go back to CoC because the latter seems extremely static in its mechanics and lonely in its gameplay.

Worth noting is that colours are an important part of identification in Gods of Olympus. Each god has a distinctive colour relative to their standard costume, but their temple, monument, and houses share that colour also. Zeus is purple, Athena is blue, Ares is red, Artemis is green, Apollo is gold, Aphrodite is pink, Hades is black, Hera is white, and Poseidon is Turquoise/Aqua. During battles a quick visual scan based on colour can reveal a path or route for the most successful attacks. Most elite GoO players will substitute the name of gods for the corresponding colour when identifying features of a base.

CHAPTER 2

Attacking – General Overview

Gods of Olympus launched in January 2016 with six gods: Zeus, Artemis, Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, and Ares. Hades was added during the summer and Hera was added at the end of the year. It was then almost a full year before the ninth god, Poseidon, was added to the forum of playable characters, in October 2017. The developers have informed some players in writing that new Gods are not a priority for the next scheduled round of updates, and it could be assumed that the addition of playable gods would be staggered by a full year from each other, or simply no longer developed for lack of viable ideas regarding unique powers and abilities, or alternatively as a result of anxieties regarding potential for exploitation by players due to imbalance with god powers. Conjecture aside, the developers are correct to have noted the immediate need for a base editor and alliance wars format in order to renew the faith of veteran players as well as adding features that might create an influx of new players.

Players attack using the “gods” (a gender-neutral term in the game community) and tutorials grant the player the use of Zeus right away. Once completing the tutorial mode, the player must pick a second god before they are able to find matchmaking battles against real players in the game. With only two gods, the ‘move-all’ button is not yet available, but one of the major oversights in the game’s design has been that the player is never directed to the move-all button and informed about its function during tutorial levels. Many new players struggle through their first dozen multiplayer battles trying to move the gods individually. Even the most elite players don’t move all the gods separately and instead have smaller teams among their gods which are moved together to particular targets. Gods are unlocked using gold and each subsequent god costs considerably more gold to unlock. Gold is required for unlocking powers and assist units, but environments are unlocked with a new in-game resource called “Ambrosia”. Unlocking subsequent god powers and assists units also increase in cost. Gold is used to upgrade god strength, health, and powers. The player is required to be at an increasingly higher level to unlock subsequent gods while selecting a god that doesn’t fit well into a player’s attack strategy can be frustrating because unlocking particular gods is not a reversible selection process.

The gods have strength, health, and three unique powers. The first power for gods is the least expensive to unlock and the third power is the most expensive. First powers are designed for crowd control and could be considered “light” attacks, while the second powers are in most cases, “heavy attacks”, and when their level is sufficiently high they may be strong enough to destroy temples with a single use. There are some exceptions to these rules: Aphrodite’s second power (“Charm Building”) requires extended use to have the same impact as most other second powers, while Athena and Hera’s second powers (“Aegis Shield” and “Revenge”) are for “tanking” and allow those gods to shrug off significant damage. First and second powers recharge on a timer. In the case of Ares’s first power, “Whirlwind”, once it has been upgraded to its maximum strength (level 60) the duration of the power is equal to the recharge time and this can make its use during battle an extremely efficient crowd control tactic.

The gods’ third powers are single-use and would be considered “special” attacks. The aforementioned Cerberus and Kraken are AI-controlled monsters that can be devastating on the battlefield. In some battles, Kraken, with its wildly flailing tentacles, can destroy multiple temples, while Cerberus is able to destroy a temple that its master (Hades) is usually unable to. One suggestion for balancing current gameplay is to change the targeting for the monsters so that they do not target temples as this would favour skilled attackers and make for a more equitable gaming experience for all players. Most special powers are amplifiers for that god’s attack (Ares’s “Bloodlust” or Aphrodite’s “Awe”) or the power buffs many of the gods’ attacks (Athena’s “Inspiration”). There are also special powers which favour defense or protection of the gods during an attack (Zeus’s “Slow Time”, Apollo’s “Healing Light”, and Artemis’s “Hawk Storm”). Many players are selective about how they upgrade their gods given that gold is harder to come by than stone. There

are several players who simply don't unlock certain second powers and instead focus on quickly getting special powers to their highest level ("min/maxing").

The gods have assist units which are keyed-in on the corresponding god's unique abilities or powers, for example, Poseidon's first power is "Water Blast" and is ranged pulse attack doing low damage on a very high interval, and similarly the Poseidon assist unit (unlocked with gold) is the "Triton" which also does high-interval, ranged pulse damage. In addition, the most recent major update for the game introduced environments, with a different environment corresponding to each god. Environments grant a 20% bonus to the temple and houses which correspond to that environment. This means that the Athena environment when selected only buffs the Athena temple and Athena houses, but gives no direct advantage to any other structures on the base (however, the Athena temple bonus itself does impact most defensive structures). The environment bonus is negated once the corresponding temple has been destroyed during attacks. Environments are unlocked with "Ambrosia" which was a new in-game resource currency added during the latest update. Ambrosia is awarded for attack victories and the amount of ambrosia corresponds to the opponent's defense trophies.

Finally, the gods all have alternate skins or costumes that have only an aesthetic function. The first skin is traditional ancient Greek costumes, the second skin set is predominantly themed as Norse/Barbarian/Medieval, and the third skin set is a fun, summer beach theme. However, Aegis has peppered-in some new single skins for particular gods which play-off of pop culture references (Poseidon's alternate is Abe Sapien from Mike Mignola's Hellboy comics, Hera's alternate is Wonder Woman from DC Comics, Hades's alternate is Dracula, and Apollo's alternate is a crossbow-wielding zombie hunter reminiscent of The Walking Dead series). Aegis also added a Christmas skin for Zeus and Aphrodite.

The maximum power for gods has slowly increased over the last two years during major updates. The old max was level 299, which represented that a god had a full level 60 rating in strength, health, and all three powers. Currently, the max power of gods is level 329 with strength, health, and special powers topping-out at level 70. During attacks, the gods that a player has unlocked appear as circular icons on the left-hand side of the screen. The icons are represented by headshots of the individual gods. Once entering a map via matchmaking, but prior to commencing an attack by dropping a first god onto the battlefield, the player is able to tap a shuffle button below the god icons. An order can be arranged by the player, and players who develop multiple attack styles may find the need to do some shuffling before each battle depending on their opponent and the layout of the base. Once the first god is dropped into battle, the shuffle button is replaced by the move-all button and the god order for that attack is locked-in. Gods can be moved individually by first tapping on their icon and their icon must be tapped first to drop them into battle. Selecting a god then presents icons on the right-hand side of the screen for activating their three powers. During battles, the god headshot icons have a shaded overlay which begins to fill up indicating the recharging of first and second powers, and when the recharge is complete the shading fades.

One major change which I would like to see for the game would be a rule against idling whereby there must be five gods on the battlefield at all times (if five gods are still available to the player). Currently, players can drop gods individually and then use them as trawlers to pull defending swarms of foot soldiers off to the edges of the map. It would be a simple fix to have a timer on idling such that the next god in the order set by a player will drop onto the map automatically within a certain amount of time if the player doesn't choose to drop them. The drop location would be in the vicinity of the god which is activated by the player at the moment when the timer hits zero. The master skill set for attacking in GoO is based around multi-tasking and honing the ability to move gods individually during battles. There is an upper limit to the progress a player can have when attempting to use gods one by one, letting each die before dropping the next one onto the map – relying on this “scramble” style has the effect of stunting personal development for the player and it makes the game less enjoyable for that player through progress tapering off, as well as it being a slog for allies who assist in the plodding battles. Idling also encourages exploits such as trawling or “cornertenting” (placing an assist unit in the far corners of the map to lure the bulk of the defending swarm).

As a beginner to GoO, I discovered the move-all button which allowed me to have success early on however my attacks involved always moving all gods together to the same target (typically a temple). Once all of the base's temples are destroyed the attacking player is victorious. After playing the game “hardcore” (an average of an hour each day, with the occasional all-day session) for a year, I finally found myself able to move my gods separately without allowing them occasions to stand idly on the battlefield taking needless damage. Currently, my opening salvo during attacks typically involves three separate fronts whereby my tanks (Athena, Zeus, and Hera) tackle centrally-situated temples that have high HP (health points), Poseidon is targeted to weaker temples nearby the tanks, and Ares is sent to protected temples at the edges of the map. When successful, this first team of tanks can destroy at least two thirds of the temples prior to the end of Zeus's Slow Time (a special power which slows all defensive units to a crawl for a short period of time). Multi-tasking is the key to progressing in the game and mastering the mechanics for attacking bases. God order is also important as many of the gods have powers which complement and “buff” each other (missing the opportunity to let Athena's Inspiration buff Ares's Bloodlust is a faux pas in GoO). Once gods are targeted to a defense structure they can be left alone and will continue to auto-attack whatever threats are closest to them. Elite players alternate between active targeting and leaving their Gods to auto-attack, and this playstyle tactic is referred to as the “slow push”. Slow push attacking is very effective for making sure that no threats are ignored or missed.

CHAPTER 3

Attacking – The Gods

The unique powers and look of the gods imbue them with a kind of personality which remains closely tied to their function as being part of the god team. Imbalance with the god's powers or player dependency on particular powers can often be read as personality quirks. This pathetic fallacy can lead to the formation and development of particular attack playstyles.

Zeus – Zeus is the default god which all players have available at the start of play. His first power for crowd control is “Chain Lightning” and will create a cascading zap of lightning which continues through a set number of defending foot soldiers based on the strength level of the power. The second heavy blow power is “Lightning Storm” and is a concentrated set of lightning bolts which do heavy damage on a small targeted area. Zeus’s special power is the most critical in the game where Slow Time can be used strategically at the start of attacks in order to give tanks a clear path to the most heavily defended temples, or can be used later in an attack to slow down the defending swarm and allow the remaining gods separated safe space for their approach to the final temples.

Athena – Athena is the definitive tank in the game. She has very high health points (10% higher than the next closest god) and her second power, Aegis Shield, creates massive damage reductions (92.5% when maxed). When maxed (level 60) the shield has duration of sixteen seconds and a recharge of twenty seconds. If the player is careful about god placement, then Athena can be positioned to always take the brunt of defense tower and monument damage. Her crowd control power is “Summon Hoplites” which involves her summoning (or spawning) a decent sized army of friendly foot soldiers in a circle around her. Athena’s special power is Inspiration and grants a significant strength boost and damage reducing shield to all allies within the area of the Inspiration circle. This means that allied assisting units, god-summoned units, AI-controlled monsters, and the other gods are also buffed by Inspiration. Typically opening salvos on bases involve the tanks using Inspiration to take down central-based temples quickly before retreating to the fringe of the base when Slow Time ends. In this respect, powers such as Slow Time and Inspiration are deployed in a highly-coordinated, planned way.

Ares – Ares is the definitive beast in the game. He deals massive damage through his heavy blow power (“Battle Charge”), and his special power, “Bloodlust”, dramatically increases his strength and the damage dealt by his other powers and standard melee attack. Although, his first crowd-control power, “Whirlwind Attack”, is more important for its consistency and duration, when it is combined with Bloodlust it can wipe out swaths of smaller defenses or massive waves of enemy foot soldiers. In most cases, high level bases cannot be defeated without Ares pounding to the centre to wipe out the most heavily-protected temples. Ares is the strongest god and when Bloodlust is maxed-out it raises his strength by two hundred percent.

Aphrodite – Aphrodite’s specialty is crowd control and her powers can create openings on the map for the gods to pass through relatively unscathed. Her first power is “Charm Units” where she can permanently convert a group of enemy hoplites or archers into

friendly units. This power is more effective than Zeus's Chain Lightning which merely destroys a group of enemy foot soldiers and other defense structures. Aphrodite's heavy power is "Charm Building" and needs to be employed strategically. During attacks, most elite players will alternate between charming buildings and charming units with the first power. Charming a defense tower might attract other defenses to it, or can start to do major damage to adjacent monuments and temples. Additionally, charming "spawners" (Academies and Archery Ranges are the defense structures which produce the bulk of the foot soldier swarm) can hold up the enemy swarm such that gods are given some breathing space either to work on temples or gain some distance from dangerous areas of the map. Aphrodite's special power is "Awe" and dramatically lowers her recharge duration while also rendering her invisible to all enemy units. At level 60, Awe has a duration of twenty-six seconds which provides enough time to either soften up a base at the start of a battle, or to quickly convert most of the swarm to friendly units once the swarm is bearing down on the gods.

Apollo and Artemis – Apollo is a ranged god who has average strength and health while Artemis is among the lowest in health and strength but is also a ranged attacker. Apollo's first power, "Flaming Arrows" is extremely effective at crowd control and when combined with Artemis's "Spread Shot" power, they can cut through a swarm quickly. Apollo and Artemis usually need to be protected in the back row of the god formation because they don't have enough health to make it through an entire battle. This led many players to saving Apollo and Artemis to the very end of their battles at which point they exploited that the gods have a faster moving speed than mobile enemy units. During these "walkarounds" Apollo's second power, "Sun Strike", and Artemis's second power, "Long Shot", would be used to take down an entire temple with each combined strike. Although this "cheesing" strategy was effective with lower level bases, Apollo and Artemis are usually most effective when supported by tanks. Their special powers are critical defensively during battles – Apollo's "Healing Light" heals all of the gods on the battlefield while Artemis's "Hawk Storm" creates a wide area around her which deals constant damage to all enemy units throughout its duration. A high level Hawk Storm can wipe out an enemy swarm on its own. Many players believe that Artemis is the most valuable god in the game and it has led to people commenting that my signature "pop" style makes them cringe. The base pop attack style involves suiciding Artemis at the start of battles by simply using her Long Shot to open up a small hole in the middle of bases. Basically, most base-pop battles are fought without her.

Hera – Hera was the eighth god added to GoO and her addition has been a controversial one. Hera's special power, "Wrath" is a devastating explosion around her and it can deal enough damage to a base that opponents have no hope of defending successfully. My signature pop style involves starting my battles with Hera's Wrath at the centre of a base. From there, the only defenses are left at the edges of a base which means that they often can't reach the gods as the gods walk around the base and take down temples one by one. In addition, Wrath is a power which is buffed by two other powers (Athena's Inspiration and Hera's first power "Absorbing Strike"). When all three powers are combined, the

Wrath explosion can be more than twice as devastating as on its own. After more than one major update, the developers didn't make major changes to the buffing of Wrath. Some players have been irate about Hera's "overpowered" status mainly because they didn't unlock her early on and they don't get to attack with her. Now that Hera has been in the game for over a year, there are virtually no players actively complaining about the balance of her powers.

Hera's first power, Absorbing Strike, is for crowd control but must be used carefully. Her second power is "Revenge" and produces a deflecting shield around her which damages and kills enemy units which come in direct contact with her. The deployment of Hera's Absorbing Strike and Revenge is intuitive to elite players but appears to elude even experienced players that are not known as the game's great attackers. The rule is relatively simple: activate Absorbing Strike when targeting moving targets, and Revenge when targeting static targets. With absorbing strike activated, Hera receives health for taking health from enemy units and structures, and so if she is confronted with a steady but low volume stream of foot soldiers she can gain a little health against their attacks on her while she destroys them with a standard melee attack. If she is used with the slow push tactic in these situations she can build up her health quickly. If the swarm is too dense then Hera cannot stop enough units to build up her health and the player is better off using Revenge (keep in mind, first and second powers for gods are never activated at the same time and the player chooses between them once recharged). Hera can also gain back a lot of health when attacking temples when absorbing strike is activated, however she will have no protection from being attacked by the swarm, towers, and monuments when focused on hacking away at a temple. Hera is the most sophisticated character in the game and mastering the deployment of her powers during battles is a critical skill for elite players.

Most of the popular attack styles which have become dominant in the game use Hera at a critical moment. In the base pop style, Hera's Wrath starts the battle at the center of a base while the newly developed "Big 4" attack style involves Hera's Wrath as a crowd control segue between the first "burst" attack by the tanks (Zeus, Athena, Ares, and Poseidon) and the slow push finesse team's finish (Artemis, Apollo, Aphrodite, Hades, and Hera). On the biggest bases in the game, the combination of Hera's Wrath and Artemis's Hawk Storm can wipe out even the largest swarms. One of the problems with GoO is that once players have experimented with attack styles, almost all elite players adopt the same style, or at least among a very short list. The predictability of attacks can make defending more intuitive, but it also makes assisting on defenses tedious. My suggested solution to the developers is that attacks should not involve using all gods that are unlocked but instead players have to shelve two gods before each battle. In this way, all bases would become more challenging, players could develop new unique attack styles, and players could approach the same base in a variety of ways - instead of attacking formulaically. Also, shelving two gods would make the strategy of customizing a lineup for battles similar to cooking armies in Clash of Clans.

Hades – Hades is the seventh god that was added to GoO and the first new god from after the launch of the game. Hades is a fun character with interesting powers, but he is perhaps the least effective overall among the gods. In my current attack style, Hades is the last god to be dropped because with a strong enough Cerberus (his special power) they can take down a final temple together even when surrounded by enemy units. Hades's first power is “Reanimate” and involves summoning a legion of skellies from fallen foot soldiers during the battle. The skeleton warriors are faster than regular hoplites and archers, but deal lower damage and have less health. An exploit was discovered in the game which has yet to be patched by the developers, whereby an enemy Hades temple reanimating a mass of enemy skellies to protect the base can be converted by Hades into friendly skellies. This “super reanimate” can be incredibly effective and sometimes there are so many converted skellies that they can't all be destroyed by the end of the battle (super-reanimate typically happens right after Hawk Storm and/or Wrath have wiped out a defending swarm). Hades's second power is “Rot” and while some players don't bother unlocking it, other players use it strategically to disintegrate houses which surround temples and had been buffing them with powerful bonuses. A well-placed Rot can save dozens of seconds while the other gods work on that tough temple.

Poseidon – Poseidon is the ninth god added to the game and the newest deity in the forum. Poseidon has led to an imbalance in attack to defense overall as he is a powerful ranged attacker but also a tank. His health is among the highest while his strength is third highest among the gods. His first power is “Water Blast” and is a highly effective ranged pulse attack which can take down a temple quickly on its own, all while Poseidon remains at a distance from the full range of defenses. His second power, “Tidal Wave” is on par with Ares's Battle Charge and a high level Tidal Wave can destroy a temple with one hit. His special power is the Kraken monster which at times can destroy several temples, but can also do virtually nothing to aid in the attack depending on where it spawns on the map.

Finally, all of the Gods have a standard ranged/melee attack when their powers are not activated. For the standard Greek deity themed skin, Zeus melees with his fist, Ares melees with swords, Athena melees with a spear, Poseidon melees with a trident, Apollo and Artemis range attack with bow and arrow, Aphrodite and Hades have magical ranged pulses thrown from their hand, and Hera has a hybrid melee-ranged attack with a whip. The alternate skins for the gods occasionally provide new weapons (for example, Athena's beach costume is a sailor outfit where her spear is replaced with a harpoon, or Zeus's medieval/barbarian costume is a Norse Odin-like warrior who wields a hammer. The animations for standard attacks and powers may be different depending on the skin which is selected.

One of the problems with Gods of Olympus attacking and balance is that currently the gods can individually overpower a single temple. This means that nine gods destroy nine temples without having to develop a sophisticated and coordinated attack style. Athena,

Zeus, and Ares when combining their special powers can reach the center of a base and destroy three temples prior to the end of Slow Time. Poseidon's Tidal Wave can destroy an outlying temple, and Hera's Wrath can destroy a more centrally located temple which the first three Gods might have missed. Aphrodite's Charm Building can convert enough defense towers around a temple to destroy it while the combination of Rot and Cerberus will have Hades taking out a seventh temple. The final task is to have Artemis and Apollo use their second powers to take out a temple in a combined strike while they walk together to the final temple. If the swarm is bearing down, Apollo can heal the pair back to full health and Artemis's Hawk Storm can wipe out the swarm until their second powers have recharged and they can finish the base to achieve victory. In some ways, this imbalance has led certain attackers to employing the exact strategy which I have just described (or slight renditions on it). This attack style (the "Scramble") is not skill-based and is the equivalent to a match of Tic-Tac-Toe. Again, the effective solution would be to impose that a player shelf two gods in each battle as well as removing idling from the game. Hopefully, this solution will become more obvious to the developers prior to the next major update.

CHAPTER 4

Attacking – Playstyles

There is a surfeit of attack styles in Gods of Olympus however the elite players and highest level players tend to employ only a few. The choice of attack style may vary depending on whether a base is set primarily as one-piece (or a single cluster of defensive structures), or whether it is a set of "islands". One-piece bases are prone to being devastated by the "base-pop" attack style however island bases insulate themselves from the full devastation of Athena and Hera combining their special powers. Lower level players may experiment with attack styles given that they don't have all gods unlocked. Most elite players in GoO have created secondary, or "mini" (or "alt") accounts and will typically unlock the gods in an order that is intuitive for attack styles which they have already honed on their main account. There are three primary attack styles used in Gods of Olympus by the higher level players: Big 4, Base-Pop, and Scramble.

The Big 4 attack style has developed recently since players unlocked the ninth god, Poseidon, and made him as powerful as their other gods. The Big 4 style is the evolution of the Slow-Push or "Carving" style. Slow-push or burst are more tactics than strategies, but many players have referred to the refined and efficient attack styles as the slow push or burst attack, generally. Carving style on one-piece bases involved Athena being dropped first and activating her Aegis Shield. She attracted all of the enemy defenses. Zeus was then dropped in behind her and his Lightning Storm would open up a small rip in the defenses in front of those gods. Ares was dropped next and his Bloodlust and Whirlwind were activated simultaneously. Zeus's Slow Time would slow the swarm while Athena's Inspiration would boost the gods' strength and reduce the damage they would

take. The tanks would begin moving toward the centre of the base with Ares carving a long slice into the centre of the base. Most players added Artemis and Hades in the back row with Hades summoning skellies to keep defenses from targeting the gods while Artemis's Spread Shot took down an array of enemy foot soldiers to thin the accumulating swarm. As a pack, they moved forward in unison where Ares would drive ahead to the central temple, and once his Whirlwind ended, his powers were recharged and his Battle Charge could take down the central, most heavily-defended temple. The other four gods would not go in as deep but would take out the temples closer to where the invasion began. At the point where Slow Time would end, the gods would have to be on their way out of the base.

Ares would likely have died once Slow Time ended and the burst was over, and at this point the swarm would be targeting the remaining gods at full speed and power. Artemis would unleash the Hawk Storm thereby destroying most of the initial swarm. The gods would begin a walk-around dealing with one horn of the horseshoe-shaped base that remained. Once Hera was added to the game, she was dropped in to the thickest remaining part of the inside of a base, or alternatively dropped at an outlying temple that was well-defended. Her Wrath would neutralize those defenses and Hera would attempt to reconvene with the other gods. Most players had Apollo standing by to heal the remaining gods with Healing Light, but other players dropped Aphrodite next provided that the remaining gods had sufficient health. It was a simple matter of circling the base and finishing off the last temples. There were renditions on this attack style where some players would open their attack with Aphrodite and use her Awe (makes her invisible) to charm numerous buildings prior to the carve, while other players would try to save Artemis and Hades until the end in order to do a walk-around using Artemis's Long Shot and Apollo's Sun Strike on temple after temple. Worth noting is that the Carve attack style typically resulted in players intentionally keeping Zeus's health extremely low and only wanted him on the battlefield for his Slow Time special power, while putting better crowd control gods onto the battlefield sooner.

When I joined the game in December, 2016, the Carve style was the most popular among elite players and Hera was incorporated into that attack style without nuance. She was usually just plunked in to do the extra damage that Ares would have done if he had the health points or strength. After assisting hundreds of Carve attacks for allies, and once I had unlocked enough gods (seven at level 65), I decided to hone the Base-Pop style instead, which has become a bit of a signature attack style for me, although there are other high-level, skilled players who often use it ("Claquesous", comes to mind). On one-piece bases, the Base Pop style involves suiciding Artemis. When the battle begins, Artemis is dropped in a position where she can get her Long Shot arrow closest to either the centre of a base or between the most well defended temples. The opening is usually targeted to a house which is guaranteed to have less health than the damage that her Long Shot deals.

Athena is then dropped in that hole in the middle of the base. Her Aegis Shield is activated and she draws the attention of all the defenses within range (which is most defenses when at the centre of a base). Hera is then dropped and she activates Absorbing Strike. Athena activates Inspiration and Hera unleashes Wrath. The resulting nuclear bomb-like “pop” decimates the inner layer of defenses and typically only the temples remain (although they may also be destroyed depending on their health points). Typically, I have Zeus dropped in with Athena and Hera prior to the actual pop and he activates Slow Time and usually Lightning Storms the central temple, although his Chain Lightning is also reliable for clearing out the closest enemy foot soldiers. Prior to the addition of Poseidon, my next two gods in the opening attack were Hades and Ares. Hades would reanimate while Ares would also take advantage of the waning Inspiration with his Battle Charge or Whirlwind, and always his Bloodlust. Hades would release Cerberus so that another tank would be targeted in the dangerous centre of the base. Cerberus (AI-control) would venture off toward an area that had one of the remaining temples, and this would lead me to taking all the gods in the opposite direction. The choice of Whirlwind or Battle Charge for Ares would depend on whether there were a lot of spawners generating a new swarm (countered with Whirlwind) or if there was another well-fortified temple that might require extra muscle to destroy (taken down with Battle Charge).

As Slow Time would end, it was typically a simple matter of replacing dead gods with fresh ones. I would walk the gods together to remaining temples. Because I would sacrifice Artemis early on I was unable to afford also suiciding Zeus, so I kept his health and Chain Lightning at a very high level to substitute for the effectiveness of Artemis’s Spread Shot. The hope was always that the Inspiration and Wrath combo would deal enough damage to compensate for losing Hawk Storm which carvers used at the end of the burst. Apollo was standing by with Healing Light and I could save Aphrodite to the very end if there was an outlying temple which she could destroy using Awe and Charm Building. The Base Pop style was a very fast attack which many players found surprisingly overpowering. I began to teach the attack style and many players adopted it, meanwhile other players like Claquesous had refined their own rendition of the Base Pop. The Base Pop attack was typically 30-50% faster than other attack styles.

However, the Carve and Base Pop style were implemented differently for island bases. Island bases are ones where the defense structures are split up into at least three clusters (but typically four, six, or eight, with temples in each cluster). The Carve attack was not much different on island bases, but instead of taking Ares deep into the centre of a one-piece base, he would Whirlwind to a central island temple while the rest of the gods would continue working one side of the map. Base-popping was ineffective on island bases with more than three islands, and in my case, I adopted the Carve style for those occasions. In fact, I had to spend many gems on resetting my gods’ statistics (costs more based on their higher level) once I realized that the higher level bases were configured as islands often enough that I needed to hone a second attack style. My Artemis had been

left very weak because of her single-use in the Base Pop style, but she had to be very powerful for the Carve style.

With the addition of Poseidon, the Carve style has evolved into the Big 4 attack playstyle while the Base Pop has simply become more potent overall. The Big 4 attack style follows the same logic as the Carve style but is a cleaner laying down of gods overall. In Big 4 attacks, the player begins systematically taking down a corner of the base using the tanks (the burst team - Athena, Zeus, Ares, and Poseidon). The tanks use their special powers to maximize destruction but will fight together until they are all dead. Typically, Athena remains and trawls the enemy swarm to the next most well defended areas of the base (the base is usually in an L-shape at this point). When she dies, the second team is dropped and they will rely on finesse and the slow push to work through the final temples (the slow-push team – Hera, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Hades). Hera drops and uses Absorbing Strike combined with Wrath in order to destroy the swarm which had been trawled by Athena. Artemis is dropped and activates the Hawk Storm while Hades reanimates (and if possible, super reanimates). Aphrodite and Apollo are dropped in the back row so that Hera takes the brunt of remaining defense damage. Aphrodite, Artemis, Apollo, and Hades are back-row gods which means Hera usually will stay at the front of their group without special attention from the player (although Aphrodite irritatingly tends to move to the front row under AI control because her strength is high).

As for Base Pop attacks with Poseidon, I simply began to swap out Hades for Poseidon. At this point, I am able to move my gods separately while maintaining a fluid attack. After the pop, Zeus, Athena, and Hera will be put on the central temples while Poseidon targets the dangerous explosive Hera temple with his ranged Water Blast, and Ares is dropped at an outlying area where he can take down a temple in a corner of the base that won't have to be returned to. When the new Base Pop attack runs smoothly, the three tanks will have taken down two central temples, Poseidon will have water blasted two relatively central but less fortified temples, and Ares will have taken down at least one well-fortified outlying temple. Typically, Ares can get through two temples on his own which means that before Slow Time ends, six out of nine temples are destroyed. The goal is to reconvene the gods on the seventh temple, but they may be dying at this point, especially Ares who will be far away from the other gods. Aphrodite drops next in my Base Pop lineup and begins Charm Units to thin and distract the swarm. Apollo will drop next and likely I will need to use Healing Light immediately. It is at this point that I will usually be squared-up on the eighth temple and the swarm will be closing-in with full force. Provided that Hera and Poseidon are still alive and healthy, their crowd control powers combined with Apollo's Flaming Arrows is enough to thin even powerful swarms (this is the most exciting moment in most battles). Hades is on stand-by in case my gods never make it to the final temple. Note that when gods are dropped onto the map, they can be strategically dropped right on top of a swarm which destroys all the units they squash – this is a risky, but often an effective technique for thinning a swarm, especially if Athena has been efficient in trawling the swarm to a single location.

The Scramble attack style is a name dubbed by myself, significant for its double-entendre. The scramble is used by less-skilled players in the game (or, lazy players – physically and/or intellectually). Scramble attacks involve the aforementioned strategy of dropping individual gods at single temples. With a sufficiently high level health and special power, most gods are able to destroy a single temple. Scramble attacks are not very entertaining to watch, they are frustrating and futile to defend against, and they are tedious to support with allied assist units. The throttle for the success of the Scramble attack style is simply whether a temple's health and bonus exceeds the damage the god can deal. The Scramble attack has been made easier with the introduction of Poseidon because his special power, Kraken, is capable of destroying one or more temples while Poseidon can still use Water Blast or Tidal Wave to destroy a temple that he is dropped beside.

The Scramble attack style involves no multitasking skill and is a low-energy attack with respect to what the player puts in effort-wise. There is a modest degree of skill for the Scramble attack in how a player calculates which gods will be most effective against which temples. With nine temples in the game, higher level bases are often laid out into nine regions, and the Scramble style could also be called a Tic-Tac-Toe attack (and it is about as uninspiring as playing a game of Tic-Tac-Toe, while also requiring about the same amount of skill in reasoning). I dub the attack style “scramble” because god order is unimportant in the User Interface (UI) whereas for other attack styles it is critical. There is no set order of gods in Scramble attacks and they will be arranged differently (ie. scrambled) for each base depending on the layout of temples. Also, I have found that the players who use Scramble attacks have a measure of panic to how they approach a base. There is a sense of desperation in achieving the destruction of a temple by a single god or pair of gods, and it is always a close call. The race to get a god to a second temple is witnessed as a literal scramble. Typically Scramble attackers destroy the Apollo temple first to remove healing bonuses on other temples. In most Scramble attacks, allied assisters are required for corner-tenting or for swarming half-finished-off temples. Elite players have scoffed at the players who use Scramble attacks because the most elite skill in the game is the ability to solo attack and beat bases without allied assist units while the next most elite skill is multitasking and managing five gods on the battlefield at once in a coordinated way. There is no slow push in Scramble attacks and none of the higher level skills are demonstrated.

I have suggested a solution to the problem of rewarding unskilled players with as many trophies and in-game resources as skilled players. The Scramble attack style could be balanced through simply re-programming the AI-controlled monsters to read temples as friendly structures. If Kraken and Cerberus refused to attack temples, then nine gods would likely not defeat nine temples with individual gods, and the Scramble attack would only be effective on the next level of players lower in the ranks (either those who still only have eight temples, those with poorly-designed bases, or those who don't have powerful enough temples to stop the gods of the Scramble attacker). In this way, the Scramble attack would still be an available option for unskilled or lazy players but it wouldn't be rewarded the same as other attack styles which require a high degree of refined skill.

Removing idling from the game would also help to solve these problems of inequity in the game. Players should be required to have multi-tasking skill for success, and removing idling would mean that players have a full complement of gods on the battlefield at all times.

To date, Gods of Olympus has provided an exciting array of playable gods and the full-control combat mechanics has led to the development of a variety of attack styles which emphasize the skill of multi-tasking in maneuvering gods on the battlefield. There remain some bugs in the programming which have allowed many players to employ exploits. The players who exploit the unintuitive, inconsistent, or “broken” aspects of gameplay will find that they can be rewarded greater than when developing skilled approaches to gameplay, and thus exploits proliferate in the game community and their use is positively reinforced through instrumental value. Aegis Interactive will have to address the unequitable aspects of gameplay in order to create a game with a healthy competitive spirit among its players.

CHAPTER 5

Defending – General Overview

Temples are the backbone of base defense and temple placement mitigates the overall base design. There is a temple corresponding to every god and the temples cannot be unlocked until the corresponding god is unlocked. All base defense structures are purchased with stone although there are a few “decorations” as exceptions (gold statues, and the market decoration which generates golds daily, are purchased with gold resources). Temples have health and bonus stats that currently can be maxed out at level 40. Each temple’s bonus has a relationship to the corresponding god and that bonus affects other defense structures and units within the base. The Apollo temple grants healing bonus to all defense structures except decorations (“shatterables”), and the Artemis temple grants ranged bonus for monuments, towers, and defending foot soldier units which have ranged attacks. The Zeus temple grants an overall bonus which affects all active defense structures, Athena temple grants health, Hera temple grants explosive power to all temples, Hades temple grants a chance for reanimation of destroyed foot soldiers (excluding skellies and tritons), Aphrodite temple grants overall bonuses to foot soldier units, and the Ares temple grants a damage bonus to all active defense structures. Poseidon’s bonus is a powerful shield granted to a single defense structure selected by the player, and players often buff their most critical temple with the bubble shield. Each 3D model temple features a statue of the patron god and when a particular environment is activated the corresponding temple’s statue will pulse like a beacon. If the player wants to understand which structures are buffed by particular temple bonuses then they can tap on the temple and all other structures buffed by that temple will be highlighted with a light flash and sparkle effect.

Once all temples have been destroyed the base is defeated, therefore the player must carefully utilize all other defense structures (including decorations) in order to stop attacking players from successfully destroying temples. The most powerful defense structures are Monuments and there is a monument corresponding to each god, with powers that are intuitive given the patron god. The monuments, like temples, have health and power which currently max out at level 40. The monuments primarily fit into two categories: ranged blasts or foot-soldier spawning. The Athena monument spawns a large group of hoplites regularly and upgrading the power of the monument will increase the strength and health of the summoned units. The Ares monument spawns Acolytes of Ares units regularly and increasing the power of the monument increases the strength and health of the acolytes. The Hera and Hades monuments operate similarly except they spawn vengeance warriors and skellies, respectively. Players may become familiar with the usefulness of these foot soldier unit types through having used them as assist units when helping allies in attacks and defenses. The latest monument added to the game was the Poseidon monument which spawns tritons whose strength and health increase when the temple's power is upgraded.

The ranged monuments strike with powerful blasts that hopefully target gods or monsters. The Zeus monument unleashes a chain lightning blast which rips through multiple units, including gods. The monument's increased power leads to more targets added to the lightning chain and a more powerful blast overall. The Apollo and Artemis monuments operate similarly where the Apollo monument unleashes a single blast to one god, monster, or cluster of foot soldiers while the Artemis monument fires an array of powerful arrows at a series of enemies. The final monument is perhaps the most valuable to a base's defense as the Aphrodite monument has the power to charm enemy foot soldier units and convert them to friendly units. Increasing the power of the Aphrodite monument also increases its effective range or area, and at a high level this monument can cover the entire base when placed at the centre. All monuments recharge at different rates and are activating their attacks continuously during defenses. Also, all monuments have an area which they cover on a map and they will not be activated if there are no enemies within that area. To check the area spread of a monument, the player can tap on the monument.

The next most essential defense structure for a well-designed base is Houses. There are nine house types and like temples and monuments, they correspond to particular gods and grant "buffs" or bonuses that are intuitive given the patron god. Houses only buff the appropriate structures which they are placed beside and in direct contact with. It is Zeus houses for overall bonus (health, attack, and range), Aphrodite houses for buffing structures which spawn foot soldier units, Hera houses for granting explosive damage, Hades houses for chances to reanimate foot soldier units, Artemis houses for increasing range to structures and units with ranged attacks, Ares houses for increasing strength/damage of active defense structures, Athena houses for increasing health, and Apollo houses for imbuing healing power (or regeneration). All of those houses will buff multiple structures which they are in contact with, for example, surrounding a single Ares

house with defense towers will increase the strength of all of those adjacent towers. However, the Poseidon house grants a protective bubble shield to only one structure which it is in contact with, and the player selects which structure that will be. To check which structures are being buffed by houses, the player can tap on the house.

Players have varied strategies with how they deploy houses, and lower level players may find it most effective to bulk up a central temple by surrounding it with the corresponding houses. When a temple is destroyed all of the corresponding houses on the map are destroyed, therefore most players tend to keep houses situated close to their host temple. Typically, temples with high health or healing will be surrounded by matching houses (Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and Poseidon). The house buffs on the temple can vastly increase the toughness of the temple and attacking gods may end up spent working on the single temple while other defenses close-in on them and shut down the attack. Alternatively, monuments and spawners (Academies and Archery Ranges) can be buffed by Artemis, Aphrodite, Hades, and Ares houses. The advantage to this strategy is that a powerful swarm can then overpower the units summoned by attacking gods as well as what assisters are dropping on the battlefield in way of support. The Hera houses were first used to surround the Hera temple at the centre of bases (just after the update which added Hera to the game), but players soon learned appropriate techniques to counter this when attacking (typically, having Ares battle charge the Hera temple at the end of his run thus negating the impact of the explosive houses). Currently, Hera houses are scattered throughout a base supporting multiple temples (and occasionally the Aphrodite monument) and in this way the adjacent Hera houses to the temples can create smaller explosions against attacking gods multiple times throughout the battle. This damage can add up and I often notice that many failed attacks are a result of Hera houses eating away at god health during the battle.

Towers have several types and although a player can neglect using towers, this will lower defense trophies over time. Most “nerfed” bases don’t use towers, or occasionally, clusters of the same tower type are placed in a cheeky manner. Towers have health and strength which can be upgraded to a maximum of level 40. The Greek Fire Tower sprays a flame which deals continuous damage to all units inside its area of effect. The fire towers have the most limited range among the tower types but they have a high attack rate and damage multiple units at once. The Archimedes Tower deals a pulse ray and has an extended range. The Archimedes towers have the same attack rate as fire towers (0.2s), but they target one enemy at a time. The Arrow Tower is a basic defense unit familiar to most games that are similar to GoO. The arrow towers have average range and attack rate, and they can hit multiple targets, yet they are most effective against summoned foot soldier units and assist units. The Ballista Tower unleashes a powerful bolt which can be extremely effective in cutting down the gods. Ballistas have an average range but a low attack rate and take several seconds to recharge. The final tower unit is the one that was added most recently to the game – the Cyclops Tower. Many players have had a lukewarm response to the Cyclops towers because although they were designed to break up attacking swarms of foot soldiers, they unfortunately have a low attack rate (2s) and are

prone to targeting enemies which they deliver insignificant damage to (typically Cerberus or Kraken). The Cyclops character standing upon the tower will launch cannon-like balls onto clusters of attacking foot soldiers.

Towers must be deployed with variety and in clever positions or arrangements to be maximally effective. Some players will arrange a row of ballistas in locations where they believe a group of gods will be marching and thus be exposed, while other players will make sure to keep fire towers from being adjacent to temples because Aphrodite can charm them and the converted fire towers will have time to take down temples. Base design in Gods of Olympus is an art and great base designers are revered. The final defense structure is the spawners – the Academy produces hoplites regularly and the Archery Range produces archers regularly. The number of spawners a base has is critical to the level of defense trophies that can be achieved. Ultimately, it is the defensive swarm which overpowers gods nine times out of ten during defense victories. Bases can also include a variety of “shatterables” or decorations. Some decorations will award gems regularly while most are seemingly for aesthetic appeal only. However, skilled base designers have learned to use decorations to slow the progress of gods or distract attacking foot soldiers. In fact, a “minefield” of decorations can push the gods into a new order which positions low health gods in the front row where the damage they take from towers and monuments may be the undoing of the attacker’s charge. Recently, with the addition of new environments to the game, sets of decorations were designed which correspond to the gods associated with each environment. For example, the stone statues of hoplite warriors become statues of tritons for the Poseidon environment while Apollo arch decorations are gold and feature Sun emblems.

There are a certain number of plots of land (60) on the map which will be unlocked by players using stone resources. Each layer of land becomes more expensive to unlock. These plots of land also feature the monuments which themselves need to be unlocked with stone in order to be an active part of a base. Opened plots of land reveal some bonus volatile decorations (trees, bushes, flowers, and rocks) which can be tapped for small amounts of gold and stone, while there are four stone altars and four gold altars scattered throughout these land plots. The altar decorations award different amounts of their respective resource on intervals throughout a day of real time.

Worth noting is that base design in GoO operates very differently from CoC. In Clash of Clans the array of defenses are determined by the level of the Town Hall. For example, all players with Town Hall at level nine will be able to unlock four Hidden Tesla towers and two X-Bows. As a result of these formulaic limitations, CoC has experienced a marketplace for base templates, and tens of thousands of players will reject the opportunity to design a unique base to instead adopt a base template which is presumed (or proven) to be effective in defending against a variety of standard armies. In GoO, players have typically designed unique bases and the veteran players design dozens of bases. Bases get “solved” and players will try new arrangements to keep increasing their defense trophies. I have designed close to one hundred unique bases and have only

copied other players on three occasions. My bases have been copied often by players in a variety of alliances. It is extremely flattering (if not uncanny!) when you face an opponent and realize that they have copied your base design, and in many of these instances I will intentionally surrender the battle to that player to show my appreciation and respect.

The other major difference between base designs with GoO versus CoC, is that in CoC each defense structure has a set price. In GoO upgrades to structures is at a set price (for example, a house being upgraded from level 16 to 17 will always cost four million stone regardless of how many houses are used in the base), however, the price of a particular defense unit is dependent on how many units of that structure are already in the base. For example, if a player has thirty spawners, the 31st spawner would cost 480 million stone, whereas if the base has no Greek Fire Towers at that time, the first tower will cost only a few thousand stone. If a player wants to spend the bulk of their resources on one defense structure type, they may find that their base isn't only imbalanced but overall lacks defensive structures. Each player can choose to spend the most on houses, towers, or spawners, but typically the soundest strategy is to design a base which is balanced with a good number of all defense structure types. Having thirty-two spawners will not stop most elite attackers if the base has no defense towers, or if monuments have no upgrades on strength and health, or if temples have no house buffs.

In addition, each major update creates new balance issues and bases will have to evolve to meet the new offensive challenges that are faced. For example, with the addition of Hera and her special power, Wrath, to the game in December, 2016, many players decided to increase their number of houses (increasing the spread of the base) because Wrath could take out a large chunk of a base right away. In addition, many players began to do "rainbow" spreads of houses so that the quick loss of temples to Hera's wrath (which would destroy an entire house type) wouldn't fully expose other areas of a base. After the Poseidon update, the Poseidon houses can protect areas from Wrath through the use of the protective bubble shields, and so the need for rainbow house patterning has decreased. Another change has been to decrease the number of spawners and focus on adding towers while increasing power to monuments and towers because Poseidon's powerful crowd control abilities (through Water Blast) negate a lot of the force and effect of the defending swarm. Many players have been toying around with the environment bonuses creating tricky areas in their base – I made my Apollo temple very powerful in hopes of stopping the tanks in the Big 4 attack, while another elite player, "Sulkick", made a base which used the Hades environment and Hades houses in order to overpower the finesse slow-push strike team with defending reanimating foot soldiers.

Needless to say, Gods of Olympus base design is a complex and precarious balancing act where the most elite players can reveal themselves as skilled designers and managers.

CHAPTER 6

Defending – Base Design

One of the features of Gods of Olympus which distinguishes it from Clash of Clans is the incredible variety of base designs. Very few players copy each other or seek out templates online. Typically, a copy is used in the interim while players wrestle with the reality that GoO lacks a proper base editor. If a player wants to redesign their base then they have to shuffle their defense structures around the map. While redesigning a base, opponents are allowed to attack. These problems have yet to be solved by the developers and the community has not suggested a white flag policy whereby a base under construction would be surrendered to out of respect. If such a policy existed, players would exploit the informal rule to dramatically increase their defense trophies. The upshot is that players need to either be quick about their redesign, submit to losing defenses while bases are under construction, quickly copy another player's base, plan the base fully using other software (such as a spreadsheet), or simply stick with their current base despite opponents having solved its traps, tricky areas, and overall logic.

I have prided myself on being a skilled base designer and have often observed and studied defenses of other players to understand the design elements which are effective. Players at lower levels will find that their key to success is having one temple which is simply too well-defended that the attacking gods are spent and wasted while working on destroying it. Typically, this temple is the Apollo temple which will be surrounded by adjacent Apollo houses, all granting healing bonuses. The gods will pound away with melee and ranged attacks on the temple, but if the temple bonus and house bonuses are sufficiently high, the healing power will negate the damage dealt by the gods and the temple will constantly regenerate to full health. Another option that players of all levels tend toward is having a very powerful Athena temple surrounded by Athena houses. The massive health points may consume the attacking gods' Slow Time advantage. If these powerful temples are placed at the centre of a base they may be difficult to access if surrounded by layers of other defense structures, and when Slow Time ends, defenses will bombard the gods from all directions. The other temples that typically get surrounded by matching houses in order to create one big obstacle are the Zeus temple, Hera temple, and Poseidon temple. The Poseidon temple can often end up tougher to get through than the Athena temple while a fortified Hera temple can create a massive explosion when destroyed which devastates the health of gods that are standing next to it or melee attacking it.

My lower level bases use to employ "gimmicks". I would occasionally set up all of my defense towers around one temple in order to force Hera's Wrath to be used at that location, but I would then fortify other areas of the base such that Hera's Wrath would have been wasted (for example, when she was needed at well-supported Apollo or Athena temples). Base design is an uphill battle because each god is more powerful than a temple on its own. For a time, the two gods that needed to be quickly neutralized were Hera and Ares, however since the introduction of Poseidon there has been a significant shift toward attacking power and effectiveness, and most of the elite players have deserted defending

bases. My lower level bases attempted to attract Ares to one corner of the map (usually with the Apollo temple) and Hera to the opposite corner (tower-heavy section). This design strategy was somewhat effective, but later I developed the “factory” which was much more effective at creating a section of my base that might require the combined might of Hera and Ares.

The “factory” was the name I gave to a cluster of soldier-spawning monuments that were heavily supported by houses. At first, the factory was placed in one corner of a four-island base such that most attackers ignored it the first time, instead favouring the standard approach to battle which targeted Athena or Apollo temples at the start. The monuments began collecting a swarm of powerful foot soldier units which descended upon the gods once Slow Time ended. Many players were taken by surprise the first time but eventually learned how the factory worked and began prioritizing its destruction at the start of battles. Eventually I made T-shaped bases where the factory was better secured in the densest area of the base (the T-junction). This design also skunked many players the first time around. However, the most efficient way to improve on defense trophies and win defenses is to attack as much as possible so that the loot gained from attacks is then put back into the base in the form of upgrades and new defensive structures. This logic is not intuitive to many lower level players who believe that the key to defensive success is overwhelming opponents with defending assisters. However, even in the most active alliances, there will always be down-time where bases are being attacked and there are few assisters available. If a base has inflated defense trophies from always being well-defended by allies then it simply means that players attacking later without defenders will reap a greater amount of trophies for attacking a base that was easier than it should have been. Everything evens out in the long run and a base has to have a certain amount of stone invested in it to maintain a certain level of defense trophies.

CHAPTER 7

YouTube Tutorials – Base Poppin’ Series

Starting in March, 2017, I began uploading gameplay videos for Gods of Olympus. Most of the videos were uncut footage of my battles, with straightforward explanations about my attack strategies, and general thoughts about the game (“Let’s Play” style format). Some videos were personal and expressed frustrations about players that were abusive to me or to other players in the community. I rarely mince my words when expressing an online persona’s impressions of a community that is filled with avatars who also represent real personalities in veiled and disingenuous ways. Online personae are not real personalities any more than characters from novels or stage plays are. The lack of governance in virtual spaces often leads people to veiling and suppressing their real values and personality traits in order to survive an often times dangerous and hostile environment. I have been DDoS attacked on more than one occasion when gaming online, and one time watched as the hacker began remote accessing my computer. These kinds of experiences will make

people wary of revealing who they truly are online and as a result they will express unique characters that are distinct from their real personalities. In my case, the character, “Lobotomous”, has a long history as a virtual persona for my presence online, but is more-or-less an expression of who the real human might have been under vastly different life circumstances. Virtual spaces and gaming communities are often grimy and nasty places to interact with others, and Lobotomous is a survivor in such places. I can imagine that I would be more like Lobotomous if my real life was experienced in an oppressed and impoverished physical location or nation of the real world.

The first video that I uploaded was recorded earlier than March and was from when I was level 72 as a player (I am currently level 102). This video started off my first series for GoO and was named the “Base Poppin” series at my YouTube channel. This first video was a walkthrough of features of the UI and was done for the benefit of viewers who might not yet be familiar with the game, or had just begun playing. For this first video my trophies were under 5000 (4746/2535-2211). This would have meant that I wasn’t among the top 500 players in the game yet. My current highest level mini account is level 71, but only has 3900 trophies. The trophies for the game have deflated in the past year because of an increased number of highly active players, and the introduction of new gods has lowered the defense trophies for all players.

This first video explained the basics of the UI and game features, but also provided tips, such as suggesting to players that they not use gems for anything other than attacking. In GoO, if the player doesn’t have enough nectar gathered (from assisting, leveling up, or simply waiting) then launching an attack will cost roughly twenty-two gems. The loot that is gained from being victorious in an “easy” battle in matchmaking is better value than how much stone and gold is granted for unlocking a god, buying a defense structure, upgrading a defensive structure, or upgrading a god through using gems. This video also explained that the battle log has a tab which opens a screen with rationale for matchups and that the attacker’s attack trophies are matched against the defender’s defense trophies for determining opponents. Many lower level players often complain in alliance chat about how the matchmaking seems unfair to them but more often than not they have yet to become familiar with this matchmaking battle selection screen.

A final interesting bit of information from the video comes at moments where I scroll through the roster of the alliance that I was a member of at the time (“Firesmoke”) and also the top ranked alliances and top ranked players lists for the game. At the time, the highest level player in Firesmoke was not even level 100, whereas today (January, 2018), that player is level 130, with the highest level player in the game being level 134. It also appears that only about a third of the Firesmoke players at that time have found a new home in the game and most have remained loyal to that alliance for over a year now. Among the top ten alliances from a year ago, the number one ranked alliance just lost that position today (“New Era”), but half of the top ten alliances from that time are still in the top ten today. Also, of the top twelve ranked players in the game from a year ago half

are still active and in that prestigious tier today. However, among the top 100 players from a year ago almost a quarter of those players no longer play, or are at least barely active.

The second video in the Base Poppin series was even older footage than the first, going back to when my base was level 61. The videos in this first series display my base designs from different moments of playing the game and it is interesting to note how the logic altered over time. These early bases did a mix of house support (rainbow) and houses were not necessarily proximate to the host temple, but instead were used to boost spawners all over the map. The spawners, which have high health among defense structures, were distributed evenly throughout these early bases in order to protect temples and keep temples well-spaced. This second video also displayed some of the announcements that were in Firesmoke at the time. The leader had written, “please stick to easy battles guys, you make it very difficult for us to def(end) you, your Gods are too weak for those bases”. A high-ranking general then announced all in caps, “please help Nikki when she attacks and please defend her! We need to support our leader! Don’t post attacks over here”. Finally, the general in charge of placing players on probation and removing inactive players (at Firesmoke punishment was a typical result for inactivity) wrote, “new members: please get assists over 500”. This visual record of the alliance announcements gives a clear indication of alliance rules and priorities at the time. When I uploaded the video, I had already left Firesmoke and my audio commentary in the video reflected my disillusionment with their stringent and discriminatory rules.

The Base Poppin series was complete with thirty-nine videos and only two were longer than eight minutes. Most of the videos demonstrated the Base Pop attack style as I had been developing it. There were examples provided of less efficient deployment of gods for the pop and I provided commentary for my reasoning about what worked - from god order, to upgrades, and movement techniques on the battlefield. I criticized the Scramble attack style early on and suggested that the secret to a strong base is in overpowering the gods with a mighty swarm. I advised that a player check how much stone they would get from 40-50 wins on easy and that if that amount of stone could cover the cost of a new spawner, then the player should purchase spawners until that many battles couldn’t cover the cost of the next one. I have maintained that rule to this day.

For the seventh video in the series, I express my frustration with how GoO is not recognized as one of the best games of its genre, and this sentiment has never faded during my activities in the game whether it is in-game alliance chat, Line app chat with players from many alliances, posts at the official forums, commentary in my videos, or letters sent to the developers. My video series has been driven by my frustrations that GoO is underrated, underappreciated, and underdeveloped. In the following video, I returned to providing tips through review of my attacks and defenses. In one of the videos a player is critiqued for having a very loose slow push style whereby they let their gods form a frontline so wide across the base that when the gods are left to auto-attack their powers can’t support each other. At this point, I was beginning to develop a nuanced understanding of what differentiated the elite attackers from regular players. In the

thirteenth video, I recognized that my previous reliance on cornertenting was an uncompetitive exploit which should not be available to players. I have maintained an active protest with the developers and the community, arguing against cornertenting and swarm-trawling.

In the fourteenth video in the series, my base-pop attack style evolved. Through experimentation I noticed that Athena's powers buffed Hera's powers. My base pop explosions were becoming exponentially larger because of this discovery and I made several videos documenting the effects. These effects were confirmed once I would spar my own base and observe the final readouts of how much damage each god had dealt displayed at the victory screen. The evolution of the Base Pop attack style through "stacking" or buffing the powers of multiple gods was a necessity because I had been hitting a brick wall in trophy-gaining as I started to face bases of the players that were over level 80. At level 80, the eighth god and temple can be unlocked therefore most of my opponents had an extra temple to contend with. I now appreciate the adage, "necessity is the mother of invention".

A week after the first video had been uploaded I added the twentieth video in the series and things started to get a little nasty for the first time. Up until this point this first series of gameplay videos was very much about providing tips and tricks to new players and commenting on the development of the Base Pop attack style. Although, I had already had a falling out with my first alliance, criticism of that experience hadn't played into my video commentary. However, in the twentieth video I addressed the issue of cornertenting. In some ways I felt like Saul on the road to Damascus being converted to a radically different belief system. I had once relied on the cornertenting exploit (luring swarms to the edges of the map) in an even more blatant way than most other players that also relied on this exploit for victories. After feeling the shame of winning battles that were undeserved, I vowed to stand against exploits in the game and support the fostering of a game culture for the game which would emphasize fairness, respect, and healthy competition.

The issue of cornertenting was a hot topic in the Line app groups and especially the GoO Global Chats at that app. I became very critical of players who continued to use the cornertenting exploit even after other players had raised it as an issue and made polite requests for it to stop being used. The first comment that I got on my videos was when I started retelling my falling out with my first alliance, Firesmoke - a player who had experienced similar problems sympathized with me.

The end of the Base Poppin series involved me reporting on the new alliance that I had joined and how some of the top players in the game who were in this alliance had persuaded me to desert the Base Pop attack style in favour of the Carve style which involved a "burst" attack with tanks at the start and then reliance on a more plodding slow push after. I developed this second attack style and showcased it in my videos explaining how it might be an improvement to the Base Pop style overall. Most of the

videos in the series had a handful of views and the only comments came from the one player who had shared a negative experience with me from the first alliance I had joined where we met.

CHAPTER 8

YouTube Tutorials – Pop to the Top

My YouTube channel is an oddity to say the least and I immediately disavow all of the content as not representing my final opinion on any matter. My online content is a mixture of Freudian talking-cure in the psychoanalytic method, with Nietzschean mouthpiece characterization à la Zarathustra. For me, it is as difficult to understand what in my online content genuinely represents me, just as it is difficult to determine what about Holden Caulfield is J.D. Salinger – so I don't bother attempting this kind of deconstruction. My YouTube content is part entertainment, part education, and part provocation. Once I realized that no one was watching and that my views and subscribers were not increasing much over time, I decided to simply produce commentary and content which interested me personally, talking out ideas and issues which both satisfied me and disturbed me. Some of this video commentary ended up quite enlightenment while other sections are purely ignorant, with some reflecting humanitarian values but also there being displays of bigotry. It is truly a mixed bag.

Watching over these old videos for the first time since I made them, I regrettably admit that the tone became arrogant beginning in the second series. Instead, of pointing out my own flawed execution in attacks or base design (like in the first series), I began critiquing other players. I was also liberal with my scathing indictment of cornertenting and did not shy away from naming names, whether it was alliances or players. With that being said, I remained very positive about my allies and was quick to compliment them and other players in the game who I respected for their attitudes or achievements. Perhaps the braggadocio was a reflection of gaining too much too fast. There were a million registered players in the game, and the progress I made was so swift that I was beating many bases of the top 100 ranked players within three months of joining the game. In fact, the second series was named “Top Pop” because each video showcased an attack or defenses against “top 100” ranked players.

Although the second series videos typically featured a single battle, the length of videos became longer because commentary would spill over. The views for the second series videos didn't improve upon the first, and I still had a sense that what I was doing didn't really matter. Occasionally, I wouldn't bother with audio commentary and would instead put in songs or sound bites from movies and television shows that I thought would be humorous, ironic, and entertaining. Halfway through the second series, some more subscribers began making comments about their experiences in the game or mentioning

that they had adopted the Base Pop attack style from having watched my videos. This was encouraging despite the low views at my channel.

All of the videos for the first series were uploaded to YouTube using the same cover image which involved a screenshot of the god menu from the game with my series title Photoshopped in with chunky 3D font. The second series was similar but the cover image used artwork for god characters that were created by the developers' concept artist. On April 1st, 2017, for April Fool's Day I decided to upload two videos that didn't fit into the series. The first was "click bait" which presented the promise of a sneak peek on a new god for the game – Hephaestus. In fact, that video was commentary about my suggestion for adding Hephaestus and I laid out possible powers that this god might have. Viewers began commenting and giving their feedback, suggesting other new gods and powers. The second video was a compilation of all the campaign levels (25 in total) in the game. I used Jesper Kyd's soundtracks for Hitman games for this video. This video also had viewer comments who mentioned which campaign levels they liked and which they found challenging. These two videos now each have over one thousand views and together have more views than the combined views of all other videos in the first two series (73 videos in total). The cover image for the Hephaestus video used artwork discovered at Deviantart.com and the Campaign video used a cover photo based on the main load screen for Gods of Olympus. I believe that the special content and unique presentation of these two videos explain their popularity. Interestingly, my suggestion for defensive features for the Hephaestus temple was in fact what the developers implemented for the Poseidon temple.

In the third series ("Get Popped"), I started to pick up some fans and random viewers would comment on the videos. At this point, I had co-founded an alliance with two of the top players from the game and I also made it into the top 100 player ranking for the first time (on April 9th, 2017). I was one of the only GoO players making gameplay videos and most of those who had been making videos prior to me had stopped in 2016. The game was not getting updated with new content frequently enough to satisfy most of the player community so there was a crisis with inactivity all around. Although I made it to the top 100 player ranking it did not create a spike in my views at YouTube. I would sometimes check out the YouTube videos of other GoO players ("Dasian Invasion", "Overkill", and "Nick") but they too were not receiving many views for the latest videos they had uploaded. Without fun, exciting, and entertaining Twitch streamers, it has been difficult to generate hype for GoO and spread its appeal through social media. The videos in my third series were a mix of productive tips and tutorials, or commentary and criticism of players and alliances based on interpersonal strife.

In 2017, the players of GoO were patiently waiting for a major update after Hera had been introduced in December, 2016. It was already May and players had grown impatient where many left the game or went inactive. My most popular video to this day is my review of the long-awaited, yet much maligned May 2017 update. The video was titled "The Death of Gods of Olympus" (over 7000 views on February 1st, 2018). Many videos

followed which gave me a platform for expressing serious concern that the update had debilitated the Base Pop style in particular. I walked away from the game for a short time and committed to no longer pursue first-order goals, such as trophy count. Instead, I took the two most recent alliances that I had been a member of and created a workable “alliance wars” format. I launched a series of videos showcasing the alliance wars and this renewed my interest in the game which subsequently led to me continuing the production of GoO gameplay videos.

CHAPTER 9

YouTube Tutorials – Back To Popping

The online gameplay and tutorial videos which I had been producing and uploading to YouTube had developed a very dark character. The first series was positive and hopeful, while the second series started to reveal an arrogance regarding my quick rise to the top echelon of players. The game started to depopulate in the first half of 2017 once players became disillusioned with the lack of commitment for developers toward the player community. The long-awaited May 2017 update was deemed disappointing by most players and I noted that all of the significant balance changes had in effect targeted the Base Pop style and rendered it ineffective. I was no longer able to battle competitively and had to accept being bumped out of the top 100 player ranking, which as a first-order goal had motivated so much of my activity in the game and with the YouTube channel.

I walked away from the game briefly and turned my attention to organizing and refereeing the first Gods of Olympus alliance wars. The success of this event renewed my interest in the game, but the Base Pop style was still not viable. I dropped trophies intentionally and turned to the Carve attack style, deserting the Base Pop completely. Although efficient, the Carve style had a heavy reliance on the plodding slow push tactic and despite my adoption of this second playstyle granting me a spot back in the top 100 player ranking, it brought no personal satisfaction because it wasn’t an enjoyable playstyle for me in particular. However, on May 28th, 2017, I uploaded a video announcing my return to the top 100 player ranking through using the Carve style, and an elite player from the game, Claqueous, informed me that the May update had actually made the Base Pop style more powerful.

At first I was confused but Claq was patient with me and laid out the details. What he explained was actually also articulated obliquely in the official notes created by Aegis Interactive which were posted online at their Facebook page when the May 2017 update released. Previously, the Base Pop style relied on stacking the powers of Athena and Hera such that the explosive pop was twice as devastating as using Hera’s Wrath alone. The May 2017 update had nerfed the effect of using Hera’s second power, Revenge, to buff Wrath. However, Hera’s first power, Absorbing Strike, had been made more powerful after the update and it also buffed Wrath. In effect, the “pop” explosion had become

larger and more devastating, and it was simply a matter of using Absorbing Strike as opposed to Revenge in the sequence of activating powers prior to Wrath. Once I had been informed of this by Claqueous, I immediately became excited for play and resumed my development of the Base Pop style. If it wasn't for this comment left at my YouTube video, I likely would have quit the game at the start of the summer that year.

The series which focused on the new and improved Base Pop style ("Got Pop?") kicked off at the beginning of June after already having uploaded 155 videos for Gods of Olympus gameplay. The Got Pop? series maintained the habit of using the same cover image for each video in the series, and most of the videos were titled based on the battle shown (for example, "Got Pop? #12 - Lobotomous vs Jbone"). However, peppered-in with these videos were the videos for alliance wars with gameplay footage of other players battling (I refereed the battles), and also videos that were focused on listing the most helpful tips and advice for players on how to become successful at the game and make the top 100 player ranking. My attitude was fresh once more and I was willing to critique my own attacks while many of the new videos focused on providing tutorials, tips, and tricks for other players using varying playstyles. The cover images for each of these non-series videos were unique and their titles indicated that the video wasn't about my battle against a particular opponent but instead keyed-in on relaying specialized knowledge on one aspect of the game. As a result of mixing in more of this focused content, there was a spike in my views and these non-series videos had hundreds of views with the top video in this grouping having almost four thousand views today. I was starting to catch on that GoO players were not interested in seeing battles among the top players but instead wanted information that would help them improve their own strategies and playstyles.

My new pet peeve shifted from cornertenting to high level farmers. The May update had made some inroads on reducing the impact of the cornertent exploit, however because the update had taken so long to release and given that it had virtually no new content and was more about tweaks to pre-existing imbalance issues, many high level players lost interest in playing. Many high level players who had relied on the cornertenting for success also started to farm. By "farming", it means that players intentionally surrender hundreds of attack trophies in order to face easier bases, but they might also "nerf" their base by reducing the defense structures to just base level temples and monuments. In this way, a player who wants to revenge attack the farmers will get very little loot and trophies. Some of these farmers ("Roundy", "MacaPapaz", and "Arya") would then attack the same ten players, dozens of times each day while choosing friends to surrender battles to in order for the farmer to stay at roughly the same offensive trophy level the whole time. For players that were trying to make the top 100 player ranking, it was extremely discouraging to be attacked by farmers and the farmer behaviour was not only unsportsmanlike but also destructive to the game culture. Already, dozens of players had gone inactive after the May update, and now disrespectful farming practices alienated the most energetic players who remained in the game.

By July 1st, 2017, I had already hit many personal milestones in the previous month (7000 trophies, defeating a top ten base, making the top 40 player ranking list, and top 30 attack trophies), however the videos which documented personal successes did not attract viewers. Instead, the most popular videos at my channel have always been those with titles that indicate a special topic, such as “best players in GoO” or “how to make the top 100”. My survey research has shown that of the million plus downloads of the game only roughly ten thousand players are active, while amongst the other GoO players who upload gameplay videos to YouTube, there are at most a thousand players who will view a very popular topic (in other words, 0.1% of people who have played GoO are highly engaged in the game culture). Around this time, I still had under a hundred subscribers with only half being regular viewers. All in all, player attempts to spread excitement about the game through social media has been a fruitless one.

CHAPTER 10

YouTube Tutorials – Event Solution Videos

The August 2017 update for Gods of Olympus added “event” mode. The events usually run for four days and have their own top 100 player ranking with gem rewards for players based on position within that ranking. Many of the elite players in the game felt that the new events was a poor choice of feature to work on given that the game badly needed new characters, a base editor, and an alliance wars format. In addition, the events involved all players being allowed to use gods with the same power level, which meant that low level players would still be able to compete for top spots in the events. High level players who had been used to the prestige and privilege of being in the top 100 player ranking were now exposed as potentially unskilled players in the broader community when they were unable to make the top 100 player ranking for the events. In fact, the first three events had virtually no New Era players in the top 100 list and this made it clear to other players that most of the high level New Era players had been achieving in the game through spending a lot of money, never attacking solo, and employing an array of unsportsmanlike exploits.

There are still only two distinct event formats: a tower defense (“Invasion”), and a standard battle with featured god (“Golden God”, and the featured god has increased strength but reduced health). The tower defense format involves increasingly difficult levels and the player is granted the ability to lay down a variety of defense towers around temples, monuments, and houses automatically placed on the map. The bases must be defended as foot soldiers close in from all directions, and eventually gods and monsters are added to the invading swarm at the higher levels. There may be a limited variety of tower types to choose from, but the player may also have additional tools such as heal, zap, and upgrade. It costs resources to purchase defenses and defensive tools during the battle, and resources are gathered through defeating the attacking enemies. The standard battle format (Golden God) is similar to the tower defense events however now the player

is the attacker. The player is given a set loadout of gods for each level in the event, and they have limited strength, health, and powers. All players will experience the same levels in the events and the events can be very enjoyable for more casual players who will get a chance to use gods and god powers which they have yet to unlock during regular play.

Each level of the event can be played an indefinite number of times until it is solved and there is no cost to make attempts. Being victorious on levels grants stone and gold resource rewards which are added to the standard stockpile in the game, and 50 gems can be spent to multiply that reward by twenty times. The event loot payouts have resulted in a lot of shuffling around among the top players and inactive players have quickly fallen out of the top 100 player ranking since the events began. Each level has an optimized arrangement of defenses or route for gods in order to be beat. Many players began recording their successes at the more challenging higher levels of the events and uploaded them to YouTube to share with other players. I was one of the first players to post my solutions to event levels, but I continued to do audio commentary not only explaining the logic behind the solution, but also critiquing the event mode generally. These videos were very popular because they provided something direct to the players and something which was of immediate concern and benefit to them.

Around this time, I realized that my GoO videos at YouTube were largely a waste of my time to produce and manage. I did several event solution videos, but overall my activities at the channel slowed down considerably. It was now obvious that viewership was predominantly driven by the selfish need of the audience and this wasn't very appealing to me. My hopes had been to educate players into being able to think through the game critically and logically, as well as providing them with news and gossip about the elite player community. I wanted a platform for bringing awareness to cultural, social, and technological issues in the game however these endeavors were clearly too lofty. The event videos had a spike in views and comments, but most comments were petulant appeals for me to load solutions to other levels which I had yet to do. Admittedly, I had always been disenchanted with much of the elite player community, but at this point I was starting to feel the same way about lower level and more casual players. With social media, self-gratification is simply the nature of the beast, but something I have a difficult time looking past.

My final sets of videos featured early moments from the alliance which I founded. I added other players from that alliance to the audio commentary of the videos so that we were having a conversation over footage of attacks and defenses, discussing new game features from the most recent update. Also, most of the newest gameplay videos omit commentary and replace it with musical soundtrack.

CHAPTER 11

YouTube Tutorials – Player Channels

Official:

Gods of Olympus – (Aegis Interactive)

The first videos for the official GoO channel were uploaded in May, 2015. There are a series of one-minute promo spots showcasing the individual gods and demonstrating their powers against non-player bases. There are also videos promoting the features that distinguish GoO from CoC. These early videos each have around ten thousand views to date, and have a handful of comments where users mostly request new gods. The next half dozen videos (from November, 2015) include voice-over narration and are “tutorial” videos instructing new players about the main features of the game and how to navigate the user interface.

On January 6th, 2016, the game released for iOS devices and Aegis released two thirty-second promos advertising the game. The second video of this set has fifty-six thousand views to date and dozens of comments. Most of the comments are again requests for new gods and an Android release. In mid-April of that year, another one-minute promo spot was added to the original series, this time for Hades, who had just been added to the game. Again, users commented that they wanted more gods, and one user, “Liam Lee”, commented, “I heard Hera is next. Their reason is some nonsense feminist gender-balance b*llshi*. Ugh. Poseidon is more important. He should be next. Hera can come right after. Then Hermes.” The notion that the developers aim for gender-balance in the god roster is something that I have heard expressed many times by a variety of players. Most are unnerved by it, although some find the penetration of social activist politics and feminist ideologies to be intrusive to the ludic aspects of the game.

Later in April, Aegis uploaded a very useful video titled, “Developers vs. Players”. One of the developers, Jay, provides audio commentary as he attacks several player bases. He provides an explanation for attack strategies and lays out some of the features of sound base design. The video has a good number of views (twenty-six thousand to date), and almost a hundred comments, of which a few dozen are pleas for new gods, especially Poseidon. The next two videos were uploaded in September and likely involved bot-generated views. The first video of this set was a twenty-second promo for the Android release of the game. This video was identical to the apple promo but has almost four hundred thousand views to date. I conjecture that view bots were employed so that this video would be the top result in the search engine and I make this claim because the video has very few comments and user ratings.

The second video is reminiscent of the well-known Clash of Clan television advertisements which use 3D animation and amusing scenarios with the cartoony characters from the game. In this promo a legion of foot-soldiers are standing at attention receiving orders from a general. The general gives a captivating speech on the battlefield and during the peppy oorah moment a Monty Python-esque sandaled foot descends from

the sky onto the general squashing him. After that amusing video, some older promos were uploaded again with updated Android links to the Googleplay store. On October 31st, 2016, Aegis uploaded an impressive cinematic promo which featured action sequences of the gods. The animation for this promo has high technical sheen however comments on the video remain petulant pleas for Poseidon to be added to the game. The developers rarely respond to their fans at the YouTube channel.

The views for the latest videos have really tapered off from that of the content uploaded in 2016. The Hera promo was accompanied with more requests from users for Poseidon to be added. Ironically, the Poseidon promos which were added to the channel in October 2017 have very few views, comments, or ratings. It would seem that the lack of updates and the unresponsiveness of the developers simply led to player disillusionment and depopulation of the game. Also, the comments on the Poseidon promos are yet again mostly requests for new gods – Demeter, Hestia, Hephaestus, Hermes, and Dionysus. Some users request Hercules or Medusa, and overall adding characters is by far the top request at the official channel for the game. This isn't surprising given the popularity of League of Legends (computer), Overwatch (console), and Clash of Clans (mobile) which have dozens of unique characters to choose from.

The official channel has less than two thousand subscribers and under a million video views in total. There are several channels for GoO gamers (like myself) which are not subscribed to by Aegis or promoted by the studio. There is a lesson here for indie game developers: reply to your users as much as possible on all social media platforms, especially the primary ones, and don't let personal politics and pride affect how you network with the most active and invested players from your game.

Anomalies:

CWA Mobile Gaming

There are several streamers for Clash of Clans gameplay and some channels have millions of subscribers at YouTube. Occasionally, these gamers will review games that are related to Clash of Clans. CWA Mobile Gaming has over one hundred millions video views and almost half a million subscribers. The channel is run by Tim, also known as "Ash" and the CoC videos are usually under the banner of "Clash with Ash". However, from early 2016 to the middle of that year, Ash uploaded half a dozen videos about Gods of Olympus, showing his playing the game and reviewing its features, especially through a comparative analysis with Clash of Clans in the audio commentary.

The most interesting video at the channel was a half hour interview with Aegis Interactive developer, and co-creator of GoO, Jay. In this interview Jay explains that the inspiration for GoO was two-fold – early gaming experiences with Midway's Rampage (1986) which he played on NES, and also early experiences with Clash of Clans from its first months

after release. Jay and Mark noted the important features that were missing from CoC and were driven to make a similar game to CoC, but one that had full combat control, social-based real-time assisting, and no build-times. In the interview, Jay claims that the team at his studio are all “designers” along with the other expertise which they bring to the game. Although GoO has been a great success for many reasons, it is also a marginalized game and one which suffers from elements of toxicity in its social-based interaction model.

The interview paints a picture of a studio living up to the old adage, “too many cooks in the kitchen”, but without Mark and Jay being trained game developers, the kitchen is also lacking a master chef with respect to design strategy and implementation. The choice to save money through not having dedicated servers for the game will always come with a price (lag and “QoS dark play” such as player use of lag-switches, IP flood software, and XG firewalls). The developers have not properly addressed the negative side-effects of having player-hosted matches. One of the players from GoO, “Elkin”, is a data and analytics strategy expert in agile execution methods. Elkin has expressed concerns with me and at the official forums, stating that Aegis has failed to implement an agile system for the game’s development and that this largely explains the incredibly staggered updates as well as general ineptitude in addressing bugs, glitches, and exploits which cause gameplay to become an unequitable experience for many players.

As someone lacking expertise in agile development for game platforms, I cannot comment on the accuracy of Elkin’s assessment however I can verify the symptoms of a condition he is describing. An inconsistent update schedule has been the bane of Gods of Olympus’s development curve and I believe it explains the dramatic tapering off in the game’s rise to popularity starting in mid-2017 and now continuing into early 2018.

Worth noting, is that at the CWA channel the GoO videos had a lot of views, mostly bolstered by CoC fans but the viewers seemed engaged in the content, and comments remarked that GoO looked like a fun game which could compliment the CoC experience. Some viewers scoffed at GoO as a meager offering in comparison with CoC. A few GoO players commented again that they wanted to see more gods added to the game.

Lex – Brawl Stars

It would seem that Aegis was having a small crisis with respect to their social media presence mid-2017. Their own channel was mainly advertising spots which didn’t inspire community interaction, while charismatic players such as myself used GoO gameplay videos to often criticize and critique many aspects of the game, from other players and alliances, to exploits and cheats, to slow roll-out of updates. Aegis probably should have approached players like me to offer incentives for doing better reviews, but I suppose they are more ethical than that as a company, at least with respect to how they negotiate with their critics. Other players who uploaded gameplay content often lacked charisma and

the videos simple weren't entertaining to watch. Overall, there are still very few GoO players who upload gameplay videos to YouTube or other social media platforms.

"Lex – Brawl Stars" immediately indicates his primary interest in mobile gaming through his username – Supercell's Brawl Stars. Lex is a middle-aged man who typically records himself playing in a view window beside the gameplay footage. His channel has five videos on Gods of Olympus, with the first being uploaded in August, 2017. This first video was titled, "Sexy Women!" which suggested a focus on the female deities from GoO, especially with respect to representations of sexuality. However, the video is mostly verbal asides in that regard while Lex plays on a very noob account and shows footage of simple, uninteresting, low-stakes battles. In fact, this is one of the problems with GoO videos at YouTube – the most popular channels are new players to Gods of Olympus and the gameplay footage is not exciting.

Lex did a few "sneak peek" videos in advance of the mid-year updates of 2017. In his videos, he sometimes comments on attack strategies or base design logic, but as a neophyte his insights often miss the mark. For example, in his video, "Best Starting Strategy in Gods of Olympus", Lex claims that Hera's Wrath stacks or buffs Ares's Bloodlust, however this is incorrect. The strategies that Lex promotes in the videos (such as "not caring" about sacrificing multiple gods) are not the kind of advice which will provide new players with success and consistent development in the game. In fact, several viewers commented on the videos that Lex's strategies were not ideal and these players then made suggestions for improvement.

The advantage which Lex had was that Aegis promoted his sneak peek videos through the newsfeed in the game itself. This would suggest that Lex was officially working with Aegis to produce this content and excite the community about new updates and features. I would like to suggest that this would have been more effective had Aegis approached an invested and high-ranked player from their game. Lex is a friendly, fun – and dare I say it – charming guy who would have been a great ambassador for the game through social media had he been an experienced player from the game.

Abhijeet Gupta

The name here is non-sequitur and the "Abhijeet Gupta" channel is one of many where hackers and modders have uploaded one or two videos with instructions on how to crack Gods of Olympus and reap a variety of benefits through cheating. The only video from this particular channel provides instructions on how a jailbroken mobile device can take advantage of a game glitch that would reap unlimited nectar and gems when a sequence of repeated actions is executed properly. The video has thirty-six thousand views to date, but one might imagine that many are bot-generated. The updated title of the video also reveals that the bug was patched. The video has a lot of down votes and commenters berate the uploader for having redundant content in the YouTube search engine.

“Daniel Hill” uploaded one video to their channel boasting of a GoO “hack” which would reap unlimited in-game resources of all kinds. The walkthrough reveals that a jailbroken phone can access a website that has back-end access to the game through a “hack tool”. The player enters their account email and then decides the resources that they want to be granted and fills out the values into fields provided in an online form. The video demonstrates the process as successful. It is well-known through the elite player community that this type of hacking is rampant. If a player keeps notifications turned on for the game on their device, then every time their base is attacked GoO provides a notification with the name of the player who is attacking. Often the name is unknown and when logging into the game there is no defense in progress. These are the hackers that Aegis has removed from the official game in almost every way and who have then been relegated to their own arena populated only by themselves. Therefore, the hackers are attacking my base dozens of times every day (more than regular players) and I suppose with maxed gods they likely win, but their trophies mean absolutely nothing because they are part of a “dark” and unrecognized community in the game. It seems that the “hack” was arranged by Aegis in order to control the flow of cheating. Other hackers have uploaded similar videos to that of “Daniel Hill”.

Uagna TV

Uagna TV is one of the few non-English-based YouTube gaming channels which has GoO gameplay content. Although this Italian channel has an animated, charismatic, and entertaining gamer at the helm, there is a similar problem as that of the Lex channel. The half dozen GoO videos were all uploaded during the holiday season of 2016, and this player was working on a noob account. It seems that this prolific game reviewer tried GoO briefly before moving on to the next game. Italians are over-represented in GoO but I would attribute this more to the mythological themes of the game than to the Uagna TV YouTube channel.

Baki Stalev

Baki’s channel is interesting in that it has a handful of GoO gameplay videos uploaded shortly after the initial iOS release however these videos still have few views. Most GoO gameplay videos from early to mid-2016 have the most views of all GoO content at YouTube. Baki shows some simple battles with his mid-level account, but only one video has audio commentary. The other videos have an arrangement of strange musical accompaniment which mostly sound like the theme songs to seventies television sitcoms. The quality of his recording device is poor and the footage is blurry. There are few comments on the videos and most are complaints about the music and the low resolution quality of the image.

TapGameplay & TwoGameProduction

TapGameplay is a channel with very general gameplay videos for hundreds of mobile games, and mainly children's games such as those from the Lego series. They uploaded a series on GoO, but the videos are simple demonstrations of the most basic features of the game and these videos lack audio commentary. Most of the views are probably generated through non-GoO players and these videos have few comments (although there is the occasional request for Poseidon).

TwoGameProduction on the other hand is a channel which has emphatic audio commentary from gamers, "Kas and Dom". Although, they are playing on new accounts, they provide useful tips (such as dropping new gods on swarms to squash and destroy them), and they provide exciting gameplay footage of battles between top players (Key vs. Raphman in one video). Although, both of these channels are run by game reviewers who are not primarily interested in GoO, the latter channel was creating content which was great promotion for the game.

GoO Dedicated:

Apart from myself, there are a handful of GoO players who have uploaded gameplay footage to YouTube and who remain primarily dedicated to Gods of Olympus among mobile games.

KeaGirl

In a sense, "KeaGirl" doesn't fit in this category however she gets mention here because her contribution to GoO on social media is the most up-to-date and trendy. Kea attempted to create an interest in Twitch TV livestreaming for Gods of Olympus in early 2017. She approached a few alliances and linked everyone together into chat sessions while Kea assisted on multiple battles among those players. One of the problems with this approach is that the average age of high-ranked GoO players is extremely high, where most of the top 100 players are well over thirty years old. We come from a generation that is not well-versed in formats such as Twitch, and watching other people play video games often seems absurd, if not simply boring.

Kea has pulled her GoO sessions from her Twitch channel, but she still has GoO videos at YouTube. Kea considers herself to be a CoC player that also plays GoO but she has been inactive in GoO for almost a year. Her first YouTube video was uploaded in May, 2016 and is a comparative analysis of CoC and GoO. Her videos usually have stylish Photoshopped cover images, and Kea is an interesting person to listen to and watch. She is competent in game recording and video editing software. This first video remarks that CoC players assumed that GoO was just another knock-off of Clash of Clans and many players

dismissed it. Kea attempts to explain the unique features of GoO which make it significantly better than a CoC knock-off.

Kea often mixes music with her audio commentary which makes for a naturally frenetic pace when accompanying gameplay footage. Some of her early videos are helpful tutorials on how to get started in the game and she also focuses on battles between top players. She compliments a lot of players for their attack strategies and explains what they are doing right. Her next set of videos broke down the different attack strategies and explained their effectiveness. Kea also has ties to the developers and has uploaded “sneak peek” videos in advance of major updates to the game (part of the Beta Tester program which any player can apply to join).

In early 2017, Kea was uploading her livestream sessions for GoO. These videos were interesting because the stakes are higher for battling when done live and the streamer can’t edit out their failure or folly. However, these livestream session videos have few views and not a lot of comments. Eventually, Kea stopped producing GoO videos and she now focuses her time now Supercell games.

Nick French

“Nick French” is a YouTube channel familiar to GoO players through its previous name, “Gaming with Nick”. Nick was one of the gamers dedicated to uploading gameplay footage for GoO in 2016. His first video was a tutorial on how to assist effectively and he followed that with a series of videos on the individual gods which showcased their different powers and abilities. He then produced an extended series of videos in anticipation of the Hades update (“Road to Hades”) which broke down Hades into all of his components, from powers to sneak peeks at artwork to details about the Hades temple, monument, and houses. Although the videos are short, separate videos for similar content seems a little excessive. That being said, Nick provides insightful commentary and tends to record gods in tighter framing making them really stand out among large bases and busy action during battles.

Similar to my videos, Nick does a lot of commentary on attack strategies and base design, and like me, he will name his unique base designs as he explains the ergonomics and potential for defense success. Nick stopped uploading videos for GoO despite being the most popular player of the game in social media. His last GoO video was uploaded at the end of 2016. Nick had a lot of fans from the game and almost all of his videos (almost one hundred in total) have at least one thousand views. Many players commented his videos praising him for good and useful information while encouraging him to keep uploading more content from the game. His final videos were about the “Cyclops” challenge where he designed his own base in the game specifically to showcase the new defense tower unit added to the game (Cyclops Tower). He then recorded allies and opponents attacking the

base as part of the “challenge”. This initiative reminds me of my own efforts in running the first GoO alliance wars.

Nick’s creativity and effort should have been better rewarded but he does remain the GoO player with the most fans on social media.

Aronos

Aronos was another popular GoO player at YouTube during 2016 and his content was quite similar to Nick French. Aronos only made nineteen videos for GoO, including basic tutorials, showcases on Hades from the time of the update, and he finished his series with “feature requests” or improvements he was hoping to see for the game. Like Nick, Aronos had strong GoO player support on his videos where most videos have a dozen comments or more, with most praising him for providing good information and entertaining footage. Prior to the Android release, the community of GoO players seemed involved at YouTube. I would suggest that the long wait for Hera (and Hera not being Poseidon), disrupted the flow of excitement about the game as purveyed through social media.

Dasian Invasion

Dasian started his GoO videos in August 2016, but ramped up his production a year later when the new events were introduced. Dasian has done comprehensive videos for all of the events in the last six months. A lot of the content is redundant because early rounds in the events can be beaten easily even by inexperienced players. Dasian does voice-over narration for some videos while tacking on electronica (dubstep) songs to others. One of the major problems with the channel is that the recording device he is using produces low resolution video (max, 720p). The blurry images make it challenging to engage with the content. Dasian rarely does videos of his multiplayer battles and typically sticks to solution videos for events, daily god challenges, and campaign levels.

Level up with Aaron

I have had little to no contact with all of the aforementioned GoO players who have videos at YouTube, however Aaron (“Overkill” in the game) is a player that I have played with on a few occasions and we have discussed the game several times on Line app. Aaron is not the most savvy technician for recording, editing, and production, however, he is one of the top ranked players in the game. His video titles are often unwieldy and include code numbers designated by the recording software. Aaron and I have joked about this and we have an amicable relationship in the game. The advice in his videos is extremely useful and Aaron is an elite veteran in the game, however his audio commentary suffers from being monotone and he usually sounds nonplussed.

Most of the GoO players listed keep their commentary positive and they rarely criticize or go after other players in the game. They aren't trying to shake things up or get the developers' attention. They often do shout-outs to other players and alliances. Early on in the game's history, Nick and Aronos demonstrated what GoO social media content could be like if full-time game reviewers were working on the game, however 2017 saw them dropping out of the race. I picked up some slack with my agent provocateur persona, while other players have been uploading, but too often their content is not very entertaining or well-produced. It remains to be seen whether there is time for some charismatic, friendly, high-level elite veteran players to throw their hat in the ring. Admittedly, my YouTube production has slowed down considerably because without a regular schedule of updates with new game features there isn't any new interesting content to show. I have put up at least one video for my battles with virtually all of the top 100 players in the game, I have covered the events, challenges and campaign, and have done a surfeit of videos dedicated to tips, tricks, and strategies. I have almost three hundred videos dedicated to Gods of Olympus and hosted at YouTube. There is simply nothing more to show for a game that has nothing more to give.

CHAPTER 12

Gods of Olympus – An Auto-Ethnographic History

At the beginning of December, 2016, I was doing my monthly perusal of the Google Play store on my cellphone. Somewhere in that frittering of time, I stumbled upon Aegis Interactive's game, Gods of Olympus. The game had already been live for almost a year and at the time boasted close to one million downloads between Android and iOS devices. I downloaded "GoO" and became familiar with the game's basic mechanics, interfaces, and gameplay, while discovering that my experience as a veteran Clash of Clans players made playing Gods of Olympus a little more intuitive from the start.

Gods of Olympus shares many features with Clash of Clans: chunky cartoony 3D models, personalized village design and management, and multiplayer attacking. Gods of Olympus also has several important features missing from Clash of Clans ("CoC"). In GoO, a player is encouraged to join alliances. Alliances have one hundred spots available, including a "Leader" role. The leader is able to hand-off leadership to another player at any time, and can promote players to the role of "Captain" and then "General". When joining an alliance, the default status of players is "Citizen", but captains, generals, or the leader can promote citizens to the officer class. These officers then have access to "Officer Chat" or "OC", which is a second chat window tabbed next to the Announcements tab that is next to the regular chat - regular alliance chat is available to everyone in the alliance. In addition, officers can demote anyone lower than them in rank, including demoting citizens to "Probation" status. Alliance dynamics are the backbone of the GoO

game culture and the social interactions in some alliances supersede regular gameplay and first-order goals for the game.

For the first few weeks of playing the game, I perused the top 100 ranking of alliances and considered which I would join. The top alliance at the time was “Butterballs” and had many of the top 100 ranked players from the game. The game provides separate listings for the top 100 players and top 100 ranked alliances, and these listings are updated regularly. Alliance ranking is based on an algorithm whereby the higher ranked players contribute a greater percentage of their personal trophies to the alliance trophy count. For example, having all top ten players from the game in one alliance could be worth more to alliance rank than having all of the bottom fifty players from the top 100 ranking. Alliance leaders choose whether the alliance is open status or closed status, as well as determining what the minimum trophy count for a player must be in order to join the alliance.

Trophy count for each player is an aggregate of attack trophies and defense trophies. Typically, these trophies naturally increase as players battle more and convert the “loot” gained (gold coins and pieces of stone) into upgrades for their attack units (Gods) and defense units (towers, barracks, decorations, houses, monuments, and temples). Worth noting, is that in the GoO culture, “Gods” is a gender-neutral term. I have never heard Artemis, Aphrodite, Hera or Athena referred to as “goddess” by players, and in the YouTube interview with Aegis Interactive developer Jay (conducted by CWA Gaming), he too refers to the gods in a gender-neutral way.

CHAPTER 13

Alliance: Firesmoke

There was one alliance among the top ten ranked alliances that had a considerably lower trophy cut-off for entrance. “Firesmoke” had a handful of top 100 players, including one of the top ten players in the game (“Warhammer”). The leader of the alliance was “Nikki” and the trophy count to join was only 1500 at the time. The other top ten alliances in the ranking had their trophy counts set to either 3000 or 3500. Given that I was enjoying the aesthetics, mechanics, and gameplay of GoO, I thought that it would be prudent to jump into an ambitious and active alliance near the top of the rankings and start learning the nuances and elite skills of the game from top ranked players.

In alliance chat, I was welcomed to the alliance by several players, including officers and the leader, Nikki. The regular alliance chat (or citizen chat) was active with players thanking each other for help and requesting assistance for “revenges” and “hard” attacks. In GoO, allies can enter the battles and drop support units for allied attackers or defenders. There are several support units that function differently and the units are available in both attacks and base defenses once the player uses gold to unlock those

units. Each assist unit type corresponds to individual Gods and the corresponding gods must be unlocked prior to unlocking the matching assist unit.

When a player is attacked by another player that used matchmaking to find that battle then the attacked player has an opportunity to revenge attack. The revenge attack can be planned because the opponent is known. The opponents from regular matchmaking are unknown prior to the commencement of the battle and there is no opportunity to use in-game resources to find a different opponent (like in CoC). GoO doesn't have enough players at this time for vetting battles – this kind of pick-and-choose system would be exploited so that attackers would never have to face tough bases and the players with well-designed bases would then not increase their defense trophy count through defense victories. There are three levels of difficulty when matchmaking – easy, normal, and hard. Matchmaking is currently determined through comparing attacker attack trophies against defender defense trophies. This system has been exploitable by players who are “farming” on attack or “nerfing” on defense.

There were some hard-and-fast rules at Firesmoke, but one of the suggested rules was that players stick to easy battles when matchmaking. The given explanation was that easy battles are easier to win and therefore players will rank up faster and gain more loot (gold and stone). However, after leaving Firesmoke, I had to seriously consider that the officers weren't interested in investing their time in watching players lose battles and trophies. Firesmoke officers were very driven by collective trophies and extremely concerned with their alliance rank in the game. At first, I thought that this was healthy competition and I bought into the Firesmoke ideology about contribution and teamwork.

I became a reliable and well-liked member of the alliance. I assisted on many battles and made sure to not violate any of the Firesmoke rules. I was attentive to assisting generals and Nikki first, as well as making sure to never post my own attacks (launch a battle) over any of the high ranked players (this was cardinal sin in Firesmoke). Trophy-wise, I started in the bottom third of the hundred players in the alliance, but within a month I was in the top half. After accumulating twenty thousand assists, I was promoted to captain and was granted access to officer chat (OC). The nature of my role in the alliance changed dramatically at this point. I was now privy to gossip and officer judgment about citizens. The primary concerns were with players that posted attacks over top players in the alliance, players visiting from other alliances that were under suspicion for “spying”, players not assisting enough or remaining inactive for days on end, or players not showing appreciation for help in the chat by typing “ty” or any other message of gratitude.

In effect, having access to OC revealed the seedy underbelly of the alliance-based game culture. I had no frame of reference as Firesmoke was my first alliance, but the politics seemed part of a corrupted, power-hungry system (recalling some of Gary Alan Fine's findings from his field research on Dungeons & Dragons in the 1980s). Perhaps, visiting players were in fact “spies” and at the time I also understood the value of prioritizing assists for the top players – it gave the alliance prestige to be top ten in the rankings. On

January 28th, 2017, Firesmoke climbed to seventh in the top 100 rankings. I was close to forty thousand assists having spent dozens of hours assisting during my free time over the winter holidays. At forty thousand assists, Nikki promoted me to general and let me know that I was the fastest player to rise to that rank in their alliance. I had many supporters at Firesmoke and most of my attacks and defenses had a good number of allied helpers. In fact, this became grounds for some players in other alliances to acquire contempt about my presence in the game. It is common that battles that can't be won without help ("soloing") can be won with half a dozen assisters. For some players, winning because of overwhelming assist support is considered unfair and undeserved.

Once I had become a general, Nikki invited me to private groups on a social chat app separate from the game – Band App. Not only was I now a member of this private Firesmoke group (open to all active FS members), but I was also invited to a secret group for generals from the alliance. I was asked to maintain the secrecy of the group, which made me quite uncomfortable. I couldn't appreciate why a game needed so many layers of administration and I found the whole structure to be convoluted and pretentious. In short, this kind of structure bred suspicion.

The secret group was busy discussing and setting up a vote on how to address the issues of one of the best players in the alliance who at the time was quite upset about the changing Firesmoke ideology. This general ("Hanimmal"), was the primary advocate for keeping the trophy count low for entrance into the alliance (which is of course how I got into Firesmoke in the first place). However, most of the other officers wanted the cut-off to be considerably higher given that the alliance was rising in the global ranks. They felt that it was more competitive to have a higher cut-off and that it would encourage higher level players to join, instead of potentially making those higher level players feel that Firesmoke was full of "noobs". Hanimmal claimed that it was important to keep the trophy cut-off low so that noobs could be trained and made loyal to Firesmoke. The pretense was that there was a Firesmoke "system" for assisting, attacking, and base design, but my experience was that Hanimmal and other officers were rarely training new players in chat. I concluded that the real reason Hanimmal wanted the cut-off to be low was in order to have a surfeit of grunt worker assisters composed of naïve, low-level noob players.

When I became fixated on this explanation, I started to notice that Firesmoke officers were quite intolerant of noob mistakes and would berate them in chat. I found myself disillusioned with the alliance, but also recognized that I had also been inundated by the alliance ideology over the months that I had been in Firesmoke. In fact, once I was promoted to general, I kicked a noob player from the alliance for having not helped properly during one of my battles. That player was in a corner of the game map dropping troops on decorations, completely away from the action. I lost the battle that otherwise would have been won with experienced assisting. I was livid, but this reaction later troubled me. After kicking the player, I had a marked sense of guilt and realized that the Firesmoke ideology had changed aspects of my basic personality when playing GoO.

I decided to not take part in the vote over Hanimmal's request regarding alliance trophy cut-off, and I also left the secret group on Band App. This action was met with suspicion where support for me in battles by the officers quickly dried-up. Many of the citizens still supported me because they were oblivious to the nuances of the officer class politics. This consistent support from citizens actually drew the ire of Warhammer who made a few snide remarks in chat against me because I was getting more assistance than he was (a top ten player in the game). Ironically, Warhammer and I are now very close friends in the game. I decided to make my exit from Firesmoke peacefully, mentioning to Nikki that I was going to explore the broader community of the game and do some "scouting" on behalf of the alliance. I promised that I intended to return to Firesmoke shortly.

CHAPTER 14

Approach to Ethnography: Virtual Persona

On a side note, players in games seldom present themselves by their legal given names, but instead devise handles or "gamertags", such as "Dark Saint" or "Thunderchunk", thus crafting personae entrenched in the realms of fiction and fantasy. I see nothing true or productive in taking online presentation and judging it as an accurate reflection of someone's character as a human being. We do not judge Brad Pitt by the actions of Tyler Durden whatsoever, nor do we judge Keanu Reeves by the actions of Neo... and rightfully so. The online persona is an act – a dramaturgical front-staging - with some truth and some fiction, without observers having the proper criteria for parsing those components. To conflate virtual persona with real-life character and to then judge someone based on online presentation is a spurious undertaking – the lack of governance in virtual spaces leads to online personae articulating many characteristics under duress while always retaining a strong need for personal security. This statement about dramaturgy and performance in virtual spaces, and judgment of virtual character is being made so that I can comfortably move forward with using gamertags from GoO without a presumption of having violated some ethical standard of ethnographic study. The players have veiled their true characters and real identities willingly through fictionalized names, and there is no evidence that their personalities in the game are any less fictionalized and idealized.

Lobotomous (my own gamertag) could be a bigoted, racist, misogynistic misanthrope, but it implies absolutely nothing about my own character as a human being. You would have to understand how creative I am, how much of a talented actor I am, and what motivates the development of the Lobotomous online persona in order to distinguish how Lobotomous's actions and words emanate from something in my true character. I may not even fully understand those motivations. Mark Twain can inscribe to a character racial intolerance, but it does not imply that he was a racist. Is Zarathustra, also Nietzsche? Those who scrutinize texts to determine a fact pattern for this kind of judgment of authorship should in turn be heavily scrutinized because their interpretation

is but one among many, and their judgment necessarily provides an incomplete assessment. That is to say, such scrutiny is typically a fruitless endeavor where any legitimate finding or judgment occurs over a long period of time and only through rigorous research across an oeuvre of textual evidence. I would advise that a field of study geared for logical inquiry and pedagogical goals should not embark in spurious, highly-personalized, and politicized modes of interpretation and judgment against others. Perhaps the next “turn” in post-structuralist philosophy should be a turn away from so many of the hermeneutic-based practices in the academy which have encouraged dogmatic ideology and the application of myopic theoretical lenses.

Therefore, for my auto-ethnographic study, I may expose Warhammer or Hanimmal for who they were as characters in a game – fictionalized online personae – that perhaps were true to the real human beings, or not at all. I am not judging the humans who presented those characters and I am simply documenting my experience with those characters and my impressions of them – impressions made through the vicarious identification and representation practices of my own online virtual persona. Even “irl” (in real life) online confessions online have become eponymous short-form for simulacra. If Tyler Durden tells you something about Brad Pitt, can you – or should you – believe it? I will assure you that if Lobotomous tells you something about Adam, you should certainly not believe it. Finally, it is important to remember that once online in the virtual social world, with the knowledge that others are presenting themselves disingenuously from their “real life” character, it may be psychologically essential to present yourself through disingenuous personae lest you become lost in the ether of digital socialization – a kind of Alice in Wonderland.

CHAPTER 15

Alliance: Firesmoke Players

Returning to the matter at hand, from a digression regarding morality and ethics in ethnographic study and reporting for game studies and player studies, I will mention that exploring the broader community of GoO was achieved with a considerable amount of baggage heaped on me from the Firesmoke experience. The Firesmoke officer personalities had already coloured my impression of the game and as I spent time in new alliances I tended to look for their equivalents there. The next alliance that I got settled into had many parallels to Firesmoke with respect to character dynamics however the ideology was completely oppositional. Firstly, I will present some character profiles for the Firesmoke officers:

Nikki – Nikki took the role of leader very seriously and had no shame in expressing that the rule of defending her base was essential to holding a spot in the alliance. She was vigilant in kicking out second-time offenders on posting attacks over her attacks or defense. She was intolerant of inactivity and only players with high trophy counts were

allowed to be inactive for more than three days. She explained that it was worth keeping those players in order to maintain a high standing in the alliance ranks. Nikki was my greatest advocate because my rise in trophies was dramatic through my “base popping” attack playstyle and this marked me as a special player in the game. Perhaps it was felt that my attack techniques could be adopted by other players in order to increase their trophies, and thus the ranking of the alliance.

Warhammer – Warhammer was a top ten player while I was at Firesmoke. He was very intense about the game and had a difficult time accepting defeat against players who were much lower ranked. He would often walk away from the game for days at a time and near the end of my time at FS, he would only support Nikki on her attacks and defense. He would also rashly deconstruct his entire base and leave it with base level temples and monuments without any other defenses (known as base “nerfing”). At the beginning of my time in Firesmoke, Warhammer was one of my advocates, but later became disgruntled with my presence because I was often getting more ally support than he was. The reason I got this support was because I was giving support, and he was slacking on that process of reciprocation assuming that support should simply be granted by virtue of his high level and standing in the game. I am now in a new alliance with Warhammer and we are close friends in the game. We have both decided to take a more relaxed approach to the game.

Hanimmal – Hanimmal was the general that pushed to maintain a low trophy cut-off for entrance to the alliance. Based on what he wrote in OC, he was gung-ho about bringing in new players and teaching attack styles, base design, and assist strategy, however, this rarely materialized in the game. In the end, I concluded that he was more intent on bringing in a large number of new (and naïve) players that would admire the high-ranked players and devote themselves to assisting those top players. Initially, I was against his plan to use noobs as a mass force, believing that it was exploitative. I made a compelling argument to the other officers and this caused Hanimmal to stop communicating with me in the game. He threatened to leave the alliance if Nikki didn’t adopt his plan, but provided an alternative of being demoted to citizen. It is my belief that the other officers found this petulant, however, most were concerned about losing one of their top-ranked players. To his credit, Hanimmal did provide a lot of advice on attack and defense strategies to me personally, but it was given randomly whenever he felt like being social. Most of the new players did not receive adequate guidance.

Icy – Icy was a top 100 ranked player during the time that I played at Firesmoke and he received the privileged treatment granted by Nikki’s rules for the alliance. Icy was quiet and never requested help. In fact, I scolded a few lower level players for posting attacks over Icy, but Icy would always state in chat that it wasn’t necessary for him to get special treatment. Icy has been inactive for several months now and has fallen out of the top 100 ranking although he is still a general at Firesmoke.

Maserati Papi and Evelyn Salt – These players were two of the higher level players when I arrived at Firesmoke. There was strife between them because it was alleged that Maserati Papi had been sending female players in the game “dick pics” over social chat apps without consent. Evelyn didn’t want to leave Firesmoke but also didn’t want to play with Papi. I remember that Maserati Papi was quite lascivious and would get excited in chat when I had flirty banter with two other female players at Firesmoke. Later, Maserati Papi quit the game and Evelyn went to a small alliance where she was leader but became more and more inactive. Evelyn was one of my friends in the game until she became inactive.

The Man – The Man was a player from Australia who usually played during the quiet hours for Firesmoke. He would pop in and out of the top 100 ranking and he would bounce between alliances never staying for too long in one place. The Man was granted honorary general status when he would return to Firesmoke. This special treatment was largely due to his high level and top 100 ranked player position however one should keep in mind that the game does not have the feature of remembering assist numbers once a player leaves the alliance. When you return, your assists are zeroed and The Man may have accumulated a lot of assists between all of his visits. This poor feature of not tracking assists for players for each alliance they have been in, has led many players to refusing to leave their alliance and explore new communities in the game. The Man should be commended for never getting caught up in this “numbers game”.

PeteyGunz – PeteyGunz while in Firesmoke was what many hardcore gamers would refer to as a “sweaty” player. He was gunning for a top 100 spot but couldn’t get there without a lot of assistance. He would assist a lot in order to recruit assisters for his own battles, but when he lost he would be impatient, irate, and often made excuses for his own poor play. These types of players are fairly common in GoO, but PeteyGunz may have been in Firesmoke because the draconian rules about assisting high level players suited his personal goals at the time. He was a medium fish in a little pond at Firesmoke but then joined the top alliance, New Era, where he seemed comfortable in being a tadpole in a vast ocean. He has been in New Era ever since leaving Firesmoke.

Athena and Ariel – Athena was never an active player during my time at Firesmoke, however she had such high trophies that Nikki and the other generals allowed her to be inactive. Ariel on the other hand was a player with high trophies who was active but never assisted other players. Nikki and the generals took a while to boot Ariel from the alliance but eventually did.

Jaz and Jamaal – These two players were lower in level and trophies but they were very active and helpful players at Firesmoke. They were generals who had been with the alliance for a long time. In fact, Jamaal had been in Firesmoke from before Nikki and all the other top players had arrived. He remembered the founder of the alliance. I use to run “queues” and “round robins” with these two players, where we would take turns attacking and assisting each other. It was an efficient and successful strategy to have smaller queues of three or four reliable and knowledgeable players.

War Hammer Jr. and HanimmalToo – These accounts were “mini” accounts for Warhammer and Hanimmal. The Warhammer mini has since become a top 50 ranked account in the game. HanimmalToo would be constantly removed from Firesmoke because Hanimmal claimed there needed to be more room for new players. Almost all of the top 100 ranked players in GoO have mini accounts. “Mathrocks” and “S2” have five minis each, and even I have two minis. Minis can be useful for adding extra assisters and defenders on battles, or they can be used to travel to other alliances without losing status, reputation, and assist count with the main account. Minis can also be used to troll alliances and players. No one is clear about how many minis “Kitten” and “Dino” have but it is likely in double digits.

Brian – Brian was the general who was in charge of maintaining the Firesmoke roster. Every few days he would roll through the player list and demote those who were inactive or kick players who were already on probationary status. Brian was also the player who would welcome new players and explain the alliance rules to them.

Optimus Prime – Optimus was an interesting player who I always thought of as exemplifying a “drunken master” attack style. His attack style was very disorganized and inefficient which led to him having very low attack trophies for his level – he was the ultimate scrambler. However, he was a reliable assister and active daily, so Nikki and the other officers didn’t seem to find his low level of personal achievement an issue.

Bacon’s Wrath – Bacon’s Wrath joined Firesmoke at a time when Warhammer had changed his name to “Nikki’s Wrath”. “Wrath” was the name of Hera’s special power and Hera had just been added to the game, so it is unclear as to whether the two names were similar coincidentally. Bacon’s Wrath was a very enthusiastic player but in his enthusiasm was caught a few times posting attacks over high-level player defenses. Once scolded by officers, he became very defensive in chat. The officers decided not to kick this enthusiastic player but did demote him to probation status. Shortly after, he left Firesmoke. I have found that probation is a very negative and alienating status in the game and typically active players who are punished with it will simply leave the alliance and look for a new home. Later, and during the time when I was an alliance leader, I made a rule that no player would ever be put on probation.

These Firesmoke players became “types” for numerous other players that I would encounter in the game over the following year. The secret group on Band App smacked of “sweatiness” and power-hunger, and I was not comfortable being part of it. The Hanimmal drama seemed trivial to me and I didn’t like that he was making a mountain out of a molehill by threatening to leave the alliance if things didn’t go his way. So, I backed out of Firesmoke on January 31st, 2017, leaving behind my officer status as general, several loyal allies, and forty-five thousand assists. The next few weeks involved me sending messages to Firesmoke officers over Band App and letting them know that I

would be returning shortly. I also took the opportunity to visit dozens of alliances and get a feel for the global game community.

CHAPTER 16

Alliance: General Survey

After leaving Firesmoke, my first stop was with New Era, which was the number one ranked alliance in the game. Their trophy cut-off for entrance was the highest among alliances (3500), but I met the threshold. During the time that I was there things were very inactive and most attacks were by the lower level players. There were plenty of defenses popping up for the top ranked players' bases, but among all defenses only those high level players got assist support. I was welcomed in by a few lower level officers and they told me what the active times of the day were for the alliance. Most players were from Turkey so for me the active time would have been midday. It didn't seem like a good fit, so I left without spending a full day in the alliance. Later, I would make a few more trips to New Era, but the nature of attacking, defending, and active times didn't change much.

The next stop was the number three ranked alliance – First World Problems (FWP). I was welcomed by some of their top players, including "Caeton", a player that I would later found a top ten ranked alliance with. A player named "Dublin" requested my age to verify that I was at least eighteen years old. FWP was classified informally as an "adult" alliance, which mainly meant that players would not receive flak for cursing or writing innocuous and playful sexual-based comments in chat. FWP was an alliance that deprioritized defending bases but required players to post in chat that they are attacking "solo", "nhn" (no help needed), or "nqa" (non-queued attack) prior to launching their battle. Most of the chat was for thanking players for help because core FWP players had an active chat group on a mobile app for more casual conversations. The alliance didn't have a lot of activity at the time and as a newcomer I wasn't getting the support that I was used to, however I would later return to FWP to organize Alliance Wars.

Once I left FWP, I decided to check out some of the unranked alliances. They could only be discovered a few ways: when not already in an alliance there is a suggested alliances screen which provides a list of ranked and unranked alliances based on recent activity, random search terms at the suggested alliances screen can reveal unranked alliances, knowing the name of an alliance that isn't ranked and searching for it at the suggested alliances screen will make it available, and finding an unranked alliance which has a top 100 player who can be found in the player ranks is another way. I tried a few unranked alliances, but the players were very low levels and mainly inactive. Often, I found that the alliance rules in the announcements tab of these unranked alliances read similarly to the rules at Firesmoke – defense was over-prioritized and players were warned about not attacking over defenses. I used the opportunity of being in the unranked alliances to type

in citizen chat that Firesmoke would be a great alliance to join. In GoO, this type of communication is often considered negative and is referred to as “poaching”. In fact, one of the top 50 alliances states in their alliance description that “poachers will be hung by their intestines”. The official online forums for Gods of Olympus often have players posting grievances about other players coming to their alliance to poach. Frankly, I believe that it is a good form of communication in lower ranked alliances and it can encourage players to become more active and to find a better community to play with.

I made a few stops in at alliances near the bottom of the top 100 ranking. Paws of Fury had several Firesmoke rejects – players who had been kicked for being inactive or attacking over top players. There wasn’t much activity in these alliances and many hadn’t had new announcements in months. Most of what was in alliance chat was short conversations between two players, and many of those conversations were several days old.

At an alliance named “Active Spartans” the alliance description made the claim that the alliance was highly active, however half of the players were listed as having not made an assist in over three months. Although, I was the highest level player in the alliance upon joining, I was still immediately put on probation by a general who informed me in chat that I had to get three hundred assists to be taken off probation and be made a citizen. Players would announce multiple attacks in chat based on nectar they had accumulated which usually read as either “4x” or “3x” (meaning four or three attacks would be run in a row). Worth noting, is that the player’s nectar meter fills up over time, maximizing at 4000, where regular attacks cost 1000 nectar and revenges cost 200 nectar. However, assisting also accumulates nectar which can push the total above 4000. Finally, when the player levels up they receive 4000 nectar for each level, which is then tacked-on to whatever nectar the player already had stockpiled. It is common in GoO for players to log on and “burn” their nectar by doing all of their attacks at once.

There were a lot of common themes and trends in the lower ranked alliances (#80-100): mostly inactive players (as determined by the last time the player assisted), sparse conversations in chat and usually between two players, no online greeting or welcoming when new players joined, announcements posting statements by officers who were apologizing for being inactive, basic questions in chat posted by inexperienced players who then received no reply, and alliance descriptions which stated that the alliance was only for active players. I began to realize that the game was having problems.

In the 85th ranked alliance, “House of Meid”, the leader, “Eric Cartman”, had many rules posted in the announcements tab which stated that players had to be active or they would be removed. The alliance was mainly inactive players but those who were active posted their attacks in chat in a unique way which I had not seen before, nor seen since. Players were to “take a number” to create an order for attacking. In practice, this strategy would start in an organized manner, but once players drop out of the queue inevitably there would be a lot of confusion and players would attack out of order. Additionally, this

alliance had a rule that players could not solo attack if there were active queues, and defense support was stated as being of paramount concern. These kinds of rules stifle personal progress in the game.

I have concluded that the success of alliances strongly depends on the rules of the alliance and how they are adapted and made flexible based on updates to the game, including the addition of new gods, new assist units, and re-balancing. It became a depressing experience playing in the low ranked alliances so I jumped back up to near the top of the list to try out a new alliance. Later, after having spent time in top alliances as well as totally unheard of alliances and everything in between, I formed an analogy to describe the experience of playing in a GoO alliance. The top alliances were like a major metropolis, always active with attacks and defenses, dozens of people chatting each day, announcements being regularly updated, and often players helping each other with advice on attack strategy, base design, or how to assist efficiently. New Era was the Mecca of the game while Titan Slayers was like New York City. Many alliances in GoO are based on nationality and spoken language. Among the top twenty alliances are Turkish, Italian, German, French, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Spanish/Mexican-based alliances.

Playing in alliances further down the ranks was similar to being in a big city (FWP or Firesmoke) while the next tier was similar to being in a small city. The small city alliances usually have a core group of very active players while most players would at least come on daily to burn nectar. In the bottom half of the top 100 ranked alliances, most were more like towns and villages. Many of the unranked alliances were much like graveyards.

As I moved around from alliance to alliance, I usually either stayed for a few hours, or I stuck around for a day or two. If I left after a few hours it was because the alliance was dead and no one was online chatting or attacking, and when I left after a few days it was usually because no one joined my defenses to help assist and protect my base from attackers. Many of the mid-ranked alliances (#30-70) had high level players in the leader role only and it seemed that these alliance leaders were interested in running their own show (like the Mayor of a town). There was a bit of a cult of personality with some of these alliances and in some cases the alliance leader had more assists than all other allies combined. In the alliance, "Medusa", the leader, "Quinn" was the only officer to make announcements and most were warnings about inactivity leading to removal. The active players were mainly there building up their nectar from assisting Quinn's attacks. In GoO, when you purchase gem packs, they come with enough gems that you can "gem your attacks" instead of waiting to reload your nectar over time or through assisting. It costs twenty-two gems to attack or 1000 nectar, and if there is already nectar built-up then the attack costs fewer gems to launch right away. While I was in Medusa, Quinn scolded a few players for attacking over and I noted that chat lacked the "ty" and "yw" abbreviations which made most other alliances pleasantly social. The alliance felt like a bit of a cult.

It is worth distinguishing that there are alliances which mainly have adults and those which are for teens and kids. Sometimes, the alliance description states which type of alliance it is, but often the alliance name can provide clues. The theme of the game is based around the deities of ancient Greek mythology and religion. There are a surfeit of players in GoO whose gamertags are “Percy Jackson” and there are several alliances which are titled after characters, locations, and events from Rick Riordan’s children’s book fictional universe entitled, Percy Jackson and the Olympians. It is usually safe to assume that alliances honouring the Riordan books are for younger players.

In February, 2017, I spent some time in over fifty alliances and at the time there were alliances which were not ranked in the top 100 listing, but would make great gains over the following year. “Pandora’s Box” billed itself as being on the rise and based on the most inactive players in the alliance, it appeared that the alliance had been founded only a few weeks earlier. Most players were active and the leader, “Madelyn”, seemed to be setting rules for the alliance which were similar to Firesmoke. Players were put on probation for attacking other officers and they would be removed from the alliance for inactivity or lack of assisting. The alliance accepted nominations for promotions and the leader was requesting that players “pledge” their allegiance to Pandora’s Box. This alliance is currently in the top 50 ranking.

Another alliance that was unranked in February 2017, but is now in the top 50 is “The Madhouse”. There was a weekly assist quota of four hundred assists and rules in announcements stated seven days of inactivity would result in player removal. Although, I had the highest trophy count among players in the alliance when I joined, no one greeted me in chat. I posted a message to the players in chat that they could consider joining Firesmoke and then I left.

Gods of Olympus has had many problems with growth which is confounding given the exceptional technical sheen in 3D models and animation, the dedication of core players, and the incredible social model for multiplayer interaction through real-time assisting. As I write this, it was a year ago that I was visiting all the different alliances and the portion of inactive players (at least a week since their last assist) in the bottom half of the top 100 ranked alliances was around 40%. I have followed up that survey more recently and the numbers have not changed much. A year ago, most of the alliances ranked between 50 and 100 had as many active players as inactive players, most players logged on once a day to burn their nectar, there was very little activity in chat, there were few announcements by officers, and yet there were often strict rules stating that inactivity would be punished. I have mentioned that small alliances are like graveyards, but perhaps “ghost towns” is the more appropriate designation within the analogy.

Often when joining the alliances in the bottom half of the top 100 listing I became the top ranked player in the alliance. This did not lead to players leaving and joining Firesmoke when I invited them in chat nor did it mean that I received a warm welcome in chat. When players assisted on my attacks, they often made comments in chat about the

awesomeness of my “pop” attack style which they had never seen before. Overall, conversation was sparse and I started to feel like a traveling freak show carnival act. Although many alliances stated in their general description or in announcements that inactive players would be removed, there were many other alliances that announced that they didn’t want inactive players removed because it lowered their global rank in the game. I consider the developers to have failed when making the retention of inactive players an option for officers. There should be automatic removal after a certain period of player inactivity (much like what happens to AFK players in RTS or FPS online multiplayer games). A roster full of inactive players has a necrotizing effect for the players who are active and in the end despite the alliance retaining a certain standing in the global ranks, the alliance’s player culture suffers greatly for an alliance being riddled with inactive players and dead accounts.

Many of the mid-ranked alliances (#40-70) have their trophy count propped-up by one or two very high level players, and otherwise these alliances have a similar profile to the other alliances below them in the ranks. This is not the case however for “foreign-based” alliances. The game is developed by Aegis Interactive, who are based in Texas, USA, therefore, it seems reasonable to refer to non-English-based alliances as foreign alliances for GoO. In the foreign alliances, there is the advantage of consolidating around a shared language, national culture, or historical imagination, and these alliances may have a mix of low level, mid-level, and high level players. The foreign alliances are scattered throughout the top 100 ranking.

At the time of writing this, “Turkish Delight” is the number three ranked alliance while “Italian Immortals” is the sixth ranked alliance. The top alliance, New Era, is a mix of Turkish players and English language-based players. Among the top twenty alliances there is also two German, a French, and a Chinese alliance. Among the top fifty alliances there is also a Korean, three Spanish/Mexican, two Italian, three Turkish, three Russian, and three French alliances. Among the top 100 alliances there is also a Filipino, Brazilian, Austrian and more than twenty other foreign-based alliances for languages already mentioned. At present, the top 100 alliance ranking lists forty-five foreign alliances representing almost twenty major languages. One might assume that among the Spanish-based alliances, there will be many players from a variety of Latin American countries, or that within the Russian alliances there may be players from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or perhaps even Slavic-speaking countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, or Serbia. I have met players of Serbian, Indian, Kuwaiti, Finnish nationality in the game, but they were playing in English-based alliances at the time. Gods of Olympus is a true diaspora within global game culture because of the overall low population for the game, but the intense popularity which it seems to have with a select few.

I have never spent much time in foreign-based alliances because the language barrier often leaves me feeling awkward about how to thank other players for assistance, and such. In addition, many of the foreign alliances are not very active, and most players log on simply to burn nectar. Most of the foreign alliances do not have top 100 players and on

Nov 30th, 2017, there were only 42 players from foreign alliances among the top 200 ranked players in the game. This means that foreign alliances usually have one or two high level players only. In comparison, top ten alliances have a dozen or more high level players. Additionally, my experience has been that many of the top ranked foreign alliances have a marked different culture from the English-based top alliances with respect to standards of play and preferences for playstyle. There are many exploits available in GoO which the English-based alliances tend to discourage their players from using as it is deemed uncompetitive and disrespectful. The foreign alliances have tended to not emphasize these traditional Western game values of “it’s not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game,” and instead they have more of a “win-at-all-costs” philosophy toward play. One might conjecture that as a foreign alliance the players feel like underdogs, so what could be considered underhanded play is not considered as such when there is a perception that the going is tough. It remains to be seen what full range of factors contribute to the marked differentiation between English-based and foreign alliance approaches to the use of exploits in GoO.

CHAPTER 17

Alliance: Finding a New Home

Within the top thirty ranked alliances in GoO, there are fewer inactive players (about 25-30% inactive for a week or longer), there is activity all day long, officers maintain the alliance with updated announcements and removal of inactive players, and players are active in chat thanking each other for assistance while also welcoming in new players. Given my investment in the game it seemed the case that I would have to find a new home in one of the top thirty ranked alliances. I had three main options: “Sloppy Seconds”, “Titan Slayers”, or returning to Firesmoke. Titan Slayers welcomed me when I joined and I immediately had support on my attacks. There was a relaxed feel in this alliance and they de-emphasized defense. There was no drama about attacking over higher level players and the high level players didn’t seek preferential treatment. A player could run attacks all day without it ever offending other players in the alliance. I played hard with the Titan Slayers guys and racked up over a thousand assists in one day, but I left to explore my other two options.

I had a sense that I would join Sloppy Seconds. Sloppy Seconds had just been founded and was full of top 100 ranked players who had recently left “Butterballs”. Butterballs had once been the top alliance and had the number one ranked player in the game, “Raphman”. The problem, which I have learned over time, is that Raphman is not much of a team player and is quite a bit of a control freak. He was making the game unpleasant for other players in his alliance who were now nipping at his heels on the leaderboard. In fact, for a brief time, “Arya” took over the top spot in the player ranks. Sloppy Seconds had a lot of players who I had seen attacking Warhammer’s base when I was at Firesmoke. I knew that the most skilled players from Butterballs (apart from Raphman)

had left to form Sloppy Seconds. It was likely that I would join Sloppy Seconds, but I was going to do a little more traveling and I had to drop in at Firesmoke to see what the future had in store for me with my former teammates.

“The Howlers” was an alliance in the top 50 ranking, but only had one top 100 ranked player, “Sulkick”. I had seen Sulkick attack other players and knew that he was one of the most skilled players in the game. I thought that it might be interesting to join him and partner up. Perhaps, I could learn the most in the game through having a single mentor, who I could shadow and pick up sound techniques from. The Howlers had a lot of inactive players, but they also had a highly-active small group of high-level players. Upon joining, I was welcomed in by a few players. A female player named “Mi” asked if I wanted to “RR” (round robin) with her. RR meant that I would attack and she would assist me, then I would return the favour. You could go as many rounds as you desire. I was agreeable, and we played together for a while with other players jumping in to assist here and there. Mi and “Isabella” had good knowledge of the game. We then formed a queue as more players joined and eventually Sulkick came online and joined in. Players were quick to thank each other for assistance in chat. Sulkick would get priority on defense and it seemed as if there were players lurking who were only there to defend him. The queue got bigger and there was more and more dialogue in chat.

I started chatting with Sulkick about whether he had spent time in the higher ranked alliances. He told me that he had a mini account (which I won’t name because minis are often supposed to be private) who was often placed in top alliances. Sulkick wanted me to stay in The Howlers, but I told him I was heading back to Firesmoke and suggested that he join with his mini. There were some very active times of day at this alliance, but overall the alliance was quiet and this meant that defenses (which pop up randomly) were often neglected. I joined a few more top thirty alliances but found that they were similar to the rest of the alliances ranked below them: low level players who don’t understand the game and who are not successful on attacks, players who receive assistance but do not thank players in chat afterward, and players who ask to be in queues but upon receiving assistance do not reciprocate. Overall, the “free-for-all” approach with lower level players simply leads to disorganization and a selfish community of unskilled players. There were some alliances that I wanted to join but they were full (100 players maximum) at the time.

I joined the number twenty-four ranked alliance, “Adults Inc.” and a major drama had been boiling over in the announcements over the previous few days. A general, “JD” had been complaining in announcements that players were not playing as a team and that too many were skipping defenses and doing “hit-and-runs” (burning nectar and going offline). The alliance leader had then demoted JD but the drama had continued in chat. JD was kicked from the alliance. The alliance was active when I arrived but it might have been due to the JD incident. I was welcomed by several players and this is where I met another highly skilled player, “Claquesous”. The queues would stop to defend, but this was the first moment where I realized some of the flaws in alliance ideologies with respect to defense priority. Defending tended to slow down the game, and if too many

defenses got prioritized back-to-back many active players would go offline, and often players were defending allied bases for players who had been inactive for long periods of time. I was now very appreciative of how Titan Slayers had structured its alliance rules and the resulting player culture which formed.

It was time to return to Firesmoke. While I had spent several weeks in other alliances, I had occasionally been attacking my old allies at Firesmoke. In GoO, a player can surrender when attacking and forfeit the battle – this is called “dropping” because you drop trophies from your own tally which are then awarded to the player you attacked. It was apparently expected that I would drop trophies every time I faced a Firesmoke player. I did so on one occasion but decided to win my other four matches against former allies. The Firesmoke guys were nonplussed when I returned, and I received a lackluster welcome because their noses were out of joint. I decided to not press the issue and just got back to business on assisting players. I decided to not do much attacking and instead focused on supporting my allies and regaining trust. I racked up five thousand assists quickly and Nikki promoted me back to captain. Once I had access to OC once more I could tell that there were problems with my presence in the alliance.

Months before I started playing the game, a prolific troll named “Dr Dre” had earned the trust of Firesmoke officers until he was promoted to general. At this point he kicked all of the captains and citizens from the alliance and then was in turn kicked by Nikki. This action is called “nuking” an alliance and it has happened a few times in the game. The dev team doesn’t seem to issue warnings against the players who nuke and their accounts are not suspended. I was not aware of this nuking during my first stint with Firesmoke, but the officers had been traumatized by the event and developed a paranoid state of mind – they were suspicious of any ally activity that was unconventional. It was expected that players would stay with a single alliance and so when I had left Firesmoke to check out the rest of the game community this had been viewed with suspicion. It was suggested that I might be a “spy” and that I might be Dr Dre on a mini account. I caught wind of this through one of the generals who didn’t believe that I was illegitimate.

My time playing at Firesmoke was now very unenjoyable. There were snide remarks made by some of the female players who I had previously been close with, while Warhammer would skip assisting on my attacks even when I was in a queue. Officers were no longer playing with me or joking around with me in chat. I used to be able to ask for support for a revenge attack and many players would post “in” in the chat to signal they were ready to assist, but upon my return very few made themselves available. I mentioned that some of the high level players that recently joined Firesmoke after my return had done so because I invited them while I was out “scouting” but I received no thanks from officers and was instead told that those players had been in Firesmoke at other times in the previous year which was then claimed as the true reason for their return.

I decided to mention the sinister and unfriendly treatment I was receiving in officer chat, at which point Warhammer promptly demoted me back to citizen and I lost access to

OC. On Valentine's Day, I left a note in chat explaining my reasons for leaving Firesmoke. Ironically, Dr. Dre (who later did a gamertag change to "Stradivarius") was in fact lurking in Firesmoke with what turned out to be his main account, "Spyder". Firesmoke eventually learned that Spyder was Dr Dre and they kicked him from the alliance, however at this point he decided to latch on to me and I was unaware of Spyder's true identity. He began following my gameplay videos which I posted at YouTube and he modeled himself as a fanboy while presenting himself as a teenager from the United States. The real Dr Dre is a grown man who I have had voice calls with using the Line chat app. Spyder trolled me for several months and I'm not entirely sure what his plans were, but I managed to draw him out eventually and discovered his true identity. Part of the reason that Spyder earned my trust is that I felt a kinship with him for the fact that both of us had been mistreated at Firesmoke and had been accused of duplicity and "spying". We shared many jokes about the paranoia and selfishness of Firesmoke officers. Spyder followed me to my next alliance – Sloppy Seconds.

When I arrived at Sloppy Seconds I was incredibly happy and the vibe at the alliance was amazing. Players were excited to be part of a new chapter in the game's history. The top players welcomed me in and they were very relaxed, cool personalities for the most part. I immediately became friends with "AJ" and "Miss Ashlee". Ash was a big assister and a very helpful player while AJ wanted to see me become more successful in the game quickly. He approached the leader "AC Slater" to give me a new attack strategy which was considered more reliable than my signature "pop" style. Worth noting, is that I still use the base pop attack style and it has been proven that it has no upper limit for success in battles. AJ and AC believed that the bigger, higher level bases required an attack style which used all of the gods in a maximally efficient way. I resisted adopting the new attack style (Carve style) because it was the style that most players used and I found that uninspiring and pretty boring overall. I decided to give Carve style a go if only to diversify my repertoire and hone new techniques for the game. It was nice to be around top ranked players who cared about me as a player and wanted to help me improve in the game. At first, Sloppy Seconds was very much concerned with helping new players that showed great potential and commitment to the game.

CHAPTER 18

Alliance – Sloppy Seconds

There were several unofficial leaders of Sloppy Seconds despite AC Slater being the official leader, and in the end the dissolution of Sloppy Seconds was a result of there being too many cooks in the kitchen. Mathrocks and Arya were officially generals but more-or-less co-leaders. There were generals who also had a lot of clout in the global game community. "Jenneo" was considered the most skilled female player in the game and had at times been ranked as a top five player. Caeton changed his name to "K" and was known as a prolific assister and enthusiastic personality among top players. I used the

opportunity of being surrounded by top veteran players in the game to take note of big improvements I could make for myself as a player. I designed a new base around some of the features of other bases designed by the top players. I noted that the Zeus monument defense structure was emphasized in the base design for many of the top players, while lower level players seemed to neglect its importance. I redesigned my base accordingly and soon reached the highest defense trophies I had ever achieved in the game. Meanwhile, I connected up with the Sloppy Seconds players on the chat app, Line, and joined the group made for the alliance there. AC sent me notes on how to do his attack style. I then began practicing this new attack style which I dubbed “carving” style, but which was commonly referred to by players as the “slow push” or even sometimes, “raphman style”.

On February 16th, I had conducted a comprehensive survey of player statistics in the game, and had concluded that there were under 250 players that had 6000 trophies or higher. For alliances ranked 1-19, there were 140 players over 6000 trophies, and for alliances ranked 20-100 there were only 42 players with over 6000 trophies. I made estimations about how many other players there were not accounted for in the top 100 alliances (only the top 100 are listed in-game). There were inevitably some high level players that were in unranked alliances or who were not in an alliance at the time (either farming or inactive). Sloppy Seconds had more than two dozen players with over 6000 trophies and I was very close to joining that club. I conducted another survey of player statistics on November 30th, and there were almost 500 players with over 6000 trophies.

The politics at Sloppy Seconds was not obvious until I was promoted to captain. I racked-up over ten thousand assists quickly and Arya told the officers that he was going to promote me. With access to OC, I was able to understand more about how top players felt about the game and each other as players. Occasionally, high level players would join Sloppy Seconds and would try to start flame wars in chat. Kitten and Dino are notorious for being adversarial and “toxic” in alliances which they are not dedicated to. They are both high-level players who are quick to brag about how much money they have spent on the game. It seemed that to them this boast was more important than the fact that they were both subpar in skill at attacking for their level. The pair joined Sloppy to start a flame war and got promptly kicked by Mathrocks. This was my first encounter with Kitten and Dino, but it wouldn’t be my last and the whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth. The two players seemed like very rotten online personalities. In time, Dino would liberally challenge many male players to visit him in his supposed home of San Francisco for a real fistfight. Needless to say, few have been impressed with his antics.

With that said, I extended an olive branch to many players since joining my latest alliance (January, 2018), and so far, Dino and Kitten have been very impressive with their general attitude and teamwork since joining. Dino and I have put our differences aside and there is no longer animosity between us – it is a good feeling. Dino and Kitten seem very loyal to our current alliance and they were major contributors to our taking the top spot in the alliance ranks. We have agreed that where my loyalties lay earlier was misplaced and that

I shouldn't have been defending particular players against Dino and Kitten, while Dino and Kitten have become more tolerant of ally behaviour which they used to launch verbal attacks about. In addition, they have both become much more skilled attackers and their base designs are among the best.

I spent a few months at Sloppy Seconds, but was getting bogged down with end of term work and marking at school, so I took a short break from the game. AJ and Miss Ashlee had become my closest friends in the game and the game allows a player to link new devices for their game account, so I sent Miss Ashlee my link code and she played on my account for about a week. While I was away from the game, I still checked in on the leaderboards and took a look at the Sloppy player roster to see if there were new high level players who had joined, or if Firesmoke players had joined, or even players that I had met while traveling between alliances. Instead, I noticed that some high level players from Turkish Delight were bouncing in and out of Sloppy Seconds. In the Line app chat group I asked the generals what these players were doing and this simple question quickly led to a schism which would eventually be the undoing of the Sloppy Seconds alliance.

Arya quickly replied to my inquiry letting me know in group chat that the Turkish Delight players had earned his personal respect for being able to beat top bases quickly (they used exploits). At this point, Caeton chimed-in reminding Sloppy players that the Turkish Delight players simply wanted to spar bases in order to solve the base so that there could be these expeditious, sure-fire victories that Arya was revering. In GoO, the player can spend a small amount of nectar (200) in order to spar their own base for testing their attack style, testing their base design for major flaws, or for warming up before a proper battle. Also, nectar (200) can be spent to spar any ally's base. It was commonplace several months ago for players to leave their alliances and visit opponent's alliances in order to spar and learn the opponent's base. This was considered by many to be a scoundrel's ploy in the game and many elite players frowned upon this, including myself and Caeton. The game lacks a base editor, so building new bases can take hours of time and it is usually only new designs which get defense victories.

Caeton was irate that Arya was sanctioning a form of exploitation against his own allies. It seemed that Arya was the type of player who cared more about getting respect from all the highest level players than from lower level players in his own alliance. In fact, the player that now impresses me the least in the game is Arya, for a variety of reasons which were not as obvious to me last year when I was still a relative newcomer to Gods of Olympus. Caeton and Arya ended up in an argument, and Mathrocks defended Arya while none of the generals jumped-in to Caeton's defense. Caeton promptly left Sloppy Seconds. For me this was extremely disappointing because Caeton had been one of the prolific assisters and best helpers at Sloppy. I agreed with Caeton regarding loyalty in the game. Shortly after Caeton left Sloppy, Miss Ashlee also made an exit. Her real life partner was also in Sloppy Seconds and she informed me that their relationship in real life was on the rocks. It was making it difficult for her to play with him online. Miss Ashlee was a

friend and also one of the great helpers at Sloppy. I had an important choice to make – to stay at Sloppy Seconds or to approach Caeton and Ash in order to found a new alliance. I chose the latter.

For me, leaving Sloppy Seconds wasn't that difficult to do. When I had first arrived all the top players were active and involved in attacks and defenses. There were big queues and I won some tough battles on the backs of veteran assisting. Over the next month, many of the veterans went inactive while players like Jenneo, Arya, and Mathrocks did long solo attacking sessions and they stopped helping in queues. I started to find that I would assist Arya, then Math, then AC, but when it was my turn to go, most of them went offline or just kept attacking themselves. It was not my place to complain about this lack of reciprocation because veteran elite players in GoO pride themselves on being competent solo attackers. It is felt that a player must learn how to win battles without assisters. Now that I have become a veteran elite player in the game I can appreciate this value, however at the time I wanted to keep breaking personal goals in trophies which usually required assisters helping me in my battles and defending my base.

With two of the best assisters gone from Sloppy and with the remaining veterans usually uninterested in assisting or running queues, I decided to leave Sloppy Seconds and I approached K (Caeton) and Ash (Miss Ashlee) on Line app to pitch them the idea that the three of us could found a new alliance which had a fairer and more equitable structure than Sloppy Seconds whose nasty hierarchy had begun to rear its ugly head.

CHAPTER 19

Alliance: Sloppy Seconds Players

Although Firesmoke had some top players, I had been disillusioned by their poor treatment of me and when I had started playing with Sloppy Seconds I noted some parallels between Firesmoke and Sloppy with respect to player dynamics and player roles.

AC Slater – AC was a player who had earned a lot of respect from other players in the game, and he was a top ranked player who was able to solo attack whenever and he didn't expect assisters or defenders. He was a pretty laid back guy when I knew him and to be honest there probably wasn't a direct parallel in Firesmoke, but Icy would have been close. The major difference between the two is that AC continued playing the game and remained an elite player while Icy never got to the highest levels of achievement in the game.

Arya – Like Hanimmal at Firesmoke, Arya played a grandfatherly role in the alliance. When either player gave advice, you would have to take it quite seriously as they appeared as scholars of the game. They can both be fickle when the alliance ideology begins to sway away from their personal values. In the end, it was Hanimmal's

stubbornness over how to recruit new players that became the first sore spot in my experiences with Firesmoke just as it was Arya's stubbornness over allowing opponents to spar bases that caused me to lose confidence in Sloppy Seconds. Hanimmal and Arya are players that would be better suited to running their own alliance with only lower level players who are dutiful and obedient.

Caeton – K was a player who reminded me a bit of Warhammer. Both players were high achievers in the game, but were not technical masters by any means. However, they are among the best assisters which is a unique skill set itself. K and WH have strong personalities and are unlikely to be scolded without lashing back one way or another. Although, I was on bad terms with Warhammer for many months, we squashed our beef and have become close friends and allies in the game. The same thing happened with K later when I returned to the alliance I founded with him and Ash.

Miss Ashlee – Ashlee, like Nikki, was the matriarch of her alliance. There were other female players in Firesmoke and Sloppy, but these women were appealing and commanded loyalty from many players. They were prolific assisters and would often make it into battles where there wasn't already someone else assisting. As a result, you would learn to appreciate their effort and they sometimes single-handedly saved you in battle. A major difference though was that Nikki was alliance leader and there were rules that she had set up to get assistance on attacks and defense, whereas Ash was comfortable solo attacking and didn't harass other players about not reciprocating as assisters.

AJ – AJ never had a parallel from Firesmoke and he is a unique personality in the game. I have heard him accused of being a “people pleaser”, but he has been a close friend of mine in the game and I have had more communication with him over the year of playing than with any other player. AJ is a likeable person - to a fault – but, he is also a skilled player in the game who is often underrated as an attacker. He has always encouraged me to desert the “pop” style in favour of something more reliable, but he has also always promoted me as a player based on my unique style and approach to the game. At this point, we are in different alliances, but usually when AJ gets me as an opponent, he will drop trophies to me.

Mathrocks – Mathrocks is an enigma in Gods of Olympus and one of the most fascinating people I have met. We chat regularly through Line app and I am familiar with Math's exploits in GoO. Math has numerous accounts – too many to keep track of – and usually spends times in many alliances at the same time. For the first year of the game's existence online, almost all players believed that Math was male, and Math pursued this identity. After Sloppy Seconds began to fall apart, Math decided to reveal the truth about being female. She showed some of the people closest to her personal photos and I have had voice communications with her also. Math is a behemoth in the game and at times has multiple accounts among the top 100 players. Currently, Math is being loyal to the newly-formed alliance, “Janus”, which has a disproportionate number of the high ranking female players.

CHAPTER 20

Alliance: Co-Leadership

I committed to leaving Sloppy Seconds, and heard from AJ that the Sloppy officers were very disappointed to lose me. I decided to keep in touch with “Donny” and AJ through Line app, and hope to play with them again in the future. At this time, I was working hard to make the top 100 player ranking and with inactivity and assisting drying-up at Sloppy, it seemed a better idea to form a new alliance with two of the game’s most prolific assisters. I approached K and Ash separately on Line app and broached the idea of co-founding an alliance. Once it was clear that they were amenable to the idea, we formed a chat group to discuss the possibilities. I had only been playing the game for three months and had little clout in the global game community. Therefore, I agreed that K and Ash would start as “co-leaders” trading the leader position from week to week. I would be a general and once the alliance was established it was mentioned that the leader role could be handed off to me on occasion. This plan suited me just fine.

We were agreed on co-founding an alliance however the alliance name was still up in the air. K and I wanted a name that was funny but ominous. “Sumthucker” was one of the names we were agreeing on as we shared a political mindset about snowflake ideology being offensive. Ash was stuck on “Dominant Few”. K and I talked privately about how we did not like the name, but for some reason it seemed like a deal-breaker to not let Ash name the alliance. We acquiesced and Dominant Few (DF) was formed. The first few days of the alliance were promising. “Salem” joined from Sloppy and claimed that he was dedicated to playing with K. “Angel” also joined from Sloppy because he was smitten with Ashlee, while “Spyder” joined from Sloppy which seemed to make him my recruit. We were all relatively high level players, with K and Ash being ranked in the top 50. K, Ash, and I had mini accounts which we used liberally in the first week of Dominant Few. A few low-level stragglers joined up from Sloppy while noob players found us in the suggested alliances listing. We had almost twenty players but would have to be half full for the alliance to be considered a success.

The falling-out with Sloppy had impacted K and Ash more than me, and where I had just met most of the Sloppy players, K and Ash had been teammates and friends with them for almost a year. I believe that K and Ash had hoped their leaving would have had greater impact back at Sloppy and that more players would have left Sloppy and pledged allegiance to Dominant Few. These hopes didn’t materialize and as a result, K and Ash both became inactive. It was the first week of the alliance’s formation and suddenly I was the most senior officer left to greet new players and organize queues. I didn’t appreciate the lack of communication with the co-leaders and there was no real indication of whether K and Ash were planning on returning to the game seriously. I was disgruntled and was having a difficult time reaching K and Ash at Line app to discuss what was going

on. After a few players joined and quickly quit, I decided I should leave before it became an embarrassing trend.

K had claimed that he was at home sick and that this was the explanation for being inactive on the game. To him, my complaining about his inactivity was insensitive and we got into an argument in OC about it. I tried to stick it out at DF for a few weeks and eventually K and Ash became somewhat active again. The air was thick though and the jaded, bitterness of Ash and K about the Sloppy breakup was not something I could relate to properly having only just joined the game a few months earlier. I was still excited about playing so I left Dominant Few, but I would return later and have a longer stay. I had a destination in mind based on communication I had had at the official forums for the game.

CHAPTER 21

Alliance: Alliance Wars

When K, Ash, and I founded Dominant Few, we used the official forums for the game (forum.godsofolympus.com) to promote the formation of the alliance and let players know that we were looking for others to join us. An alliance leader, “Bandit”, messaged me privately to ask whether I wanted to join his alliance, “Heathens”. Heathens had just formed as a merger of two smaller alliances (“Savages” and “Anarchy”). Bandit and his generals were aggressive in recruiting and I received a few messages at the forums from his generals asking if I wanted to join Heathens. At the time, Heathens was incredibly active and the players were doing massive queues, often with double-digit assisters. Incidentally, massive queues are the greatest promotional advertisement for a new alliance. When opponents look in their battle logs and see that they were defeated with overwhelming collective force, many will jump ship and sign up to be part of the onslaught. In the least, the new alliance receives a lot of buzz within the broader game community.

I joined Heathens and received a very warm welcome. I was feeling great about the move and started recruiting for the alliance as well. When Sulkick’s mini account joined Heathens, I really leaned on him to bring the whole Howlers crew over. He was agreeable to the idea and Sulkick, Mi, Isabella, and “Randy” joined Heathens. They were all prolific assisters and were very active players who were reliable for running queues and round robins. Other players followed from Howlers and Heathens was filling up with enthusiastic, active players. There was a very positive vibe in the alliance and I don’t recall players ever complaining about a lack of assistance. The rules of the alliance weren’t that formal, but generals and Bandit would call out defenses as they came up. A large queue of players would show up for defenses and would have great success in stopping even powerful attackers.

Bandit was excited to have me and was familiar with my videos at YouTube. He asked whether I could produce some promotional videos about the Heathens “Horde” which is the name he gave to the large number of assisters at the alliance during battles. I thought that an alliance promo video was a great idea and I had never seen anything like it at YouTube. All of the GoO videos were about individual players (including my own). We organized a time through the Line group where twenty players would commit to being online, and then I started recording the battles. I uploaded the first promo video soon after recording it, but noted that player loyalty to me hadn’t changed radically. Many players didn’t seem interested in GoO social media and my video views reflected that only the core group of players at Heathens had been interested in following the link to my video.

I figured that it was more important to have a tight relationship with the officers so I wasn’t worried about the lukewarm response from the lower level players regarding the promo video. In fact, I recorded a second video for Heathens later on. My time at Heathens was very enjoyable but I started to notice players getting sweaty about assisting and instead of complaining in chat, several high level players simply wouldn’t attack until they had all their assisters lined up and ready to go. I was beginning to remember some of the values from Sloppy Seconds which were promoted by the highest ranked players in the game. At this point, I was becoming more competent in attacking and was able to win tough battles without help. I had developed two attack styles and could work them in efficiently based on the different base designs of my opponents. I would base-pop one-piece bases and use the carve style on island bases. The choice to wait in a long queue to ensure victory was beginning to lose its appeal and instead I wanted to attack solo without alienating myself from my allies.

Heathens had cracked the top ten alliance ranking and some of the players were getting cocky about their quick rise. Having been in Firesmoke and remembering their sweatiness about alliance rank, I was not interested in hearing the appeal in chat and pep talks at Line about how assisting comes first in order to maintain rank. Frankly, I was missing Sloppy Seconds, but felt embarrassed to go back. New players had not joined Sloppy and it seemed like if I went back I would have the benefit of veteran maturity, but would be lacking the support necessary to secure a position in the top 100 player ranking (which I was close to achieving). I made a comfortable exit from Heathens and jumped back into First World Problems (FWP) which seemed to be a less intense experience overall.

FWP was one of the older alliances in the game and the players had settled into playing habits which weren’t disruptive to the overall vibe. Their top player, “Zion” was like Icy and AC Slater, and he didn’t have any problems with soloing. Their leader, “Nerdjitsu” was a laid-back, nice guy who didn’t want the alliance pervaded with drama. FWP had some players that were dedicated to the social aspects of the game and didn’t sweat losing on the battlefield. “Miss Drea” was a prolific assister and she didn’t push personal first-order goals in the game. These players helped in keeping the atmosphere of the alliance

relaxed and friendly. I received a warm welcome when I joined and immediately started attacking stating in chat that people didn't have to prioritize assisting me.

In GoO, a player may discover that they feel guilt when allies assist them if then the player doesn't want to assist back. I was receiving enough support from the moment I joined FWP that although I intended to do a lot of soloing, instead I jumped into queues or made sure to reciprocate with players that had just helped me. FWP had a large contingent of female players that were very active assisters but not attackers. This female contingent may have been an important factor in FWP not being an aggressive, sweaty alliance. FWP was a little too relaxed for my tastes and they hadn't been set-off into a critical rage by the terrible May update, the way I had. So, I got to thinking about how I could make my time with them more interesting and how I could go about renewing my interest in the game.

I had been up and down in the player ranks as I moved alliances and worked on honing a second attack style. I had made the top 100 list on a couple of occasions but was knocked out quickly. The May update was a disaster for the game and players either became livid with the developers, or they had already been irate and now threw up their hands in defeat. The May update had been announced months earlier through beta testers who had been making assumptions on a potential release date. The devs did not correct this misinformation and players became agitated about having to wait for new content. Most players expected a new character, a base editor, or an alliance wars format in early March. Personally, I was hoping for a solo mode with separate player ranking. I believed that when players were forced into being social in alliances it was actually hurting the development of the game and its popularity. Many players enjoy campaign mode in video games (magic circle) and don't want all of gameplay to be competitive or social, but GoO provides few options for non-competitive solo play. Additionally, many players do not want their failures exposed to a large number of opponents and teammates. Solo mode would have involved attacking bases where no help can be provided but also no defenders can protect a base being attacked.

The May update brought none of the new content which players had been asking for at YouTube or at the forums for the previous six months. Instead, there were minor balancing tweaks made and even event mode wasn't added until the next major update in August. Event mode was a simple format which used pre-existing assets and game mechanics. Overall, it was a very uninspiring time for the player community and it caused me to create my most watched YouTube video, "The Death of Gods of Olympus". Although, I was upset for some of the wrong reasons, I did have legitimate grievances expressed in the video. I decided to stop pursuing personal first-order goals such as trophy counts and instead focused on making my game experience better by adding new content despite the developers.

I had just come from Heathens, and on paper Heathens and FWP matched up very well. They both had roughly the same number of high level players and their top players

(Sulkick and Zion) were also closely matched. Gods of Olympus lacks certain key features which are integral to the Clash of Clans experience, in particular, a base editor and a clan wars format. I started to wonder whether I could create a makeshift alliance wars format for GoO given the tools at my disposal. There was no way to commandeer the developers to help with organizing the alliance wars. The devs had proven to be quite unresponsive with their player community. The forums were heavily moderated by “Castiel” and his liberal censorship had chased off too many of the most energetic players from the forums. Players were becoming disillusioned with the devs, having waited half a year for a new character (Hera after Hades), been promised a big update for early 2017 (which happened in May and wasn’t “big” by any means), and lacking a base editor and other important standard features. It was common to hear a variety of players bad-talking the devs at the forums, in alliance chat, and on Line app in alliance groups as well as Global GoO chat groups.

I devised an alliance wars structure that would work and I pitched the idea to Heathens and FWP. Both alliances were very excited about the idea and hopped on board immediately. Some of the Heathens generals were using the forums right away to hype up the event and rub it in the faces of the devs. Undoubtedly, that put a lot of pressure on me to make sure that everything would work properly and be an equitable experience for both alliances and all the players involved. Ten players were selected from each alliance including the top player. Players had to have at least five thousand trophies to be considered. I matched players against each other based on level, god power, and attack trophies, but I also applied an algorithm whereby the power level of the player’s gods were recalibrated to make sure that “min/maxing” stats had been nullified. Some players will never unlock certain powers because they don’t use those powers during attacks and therefore do not want to waste gold resources on upgrading it. Zeus with low health or Chain Lightning power (typical for carve attackers who only use him for his Slow Time special power) will have a low god power rating for their Zeus despite his usefulness in battle being not much different than the players that have a more balanced approach to upgrading their gods.

I found that the players couldn’t be matched up one-to-one but that little groups could be matched up and balanced. For example, collectively, the fourth, fifth, sixth players from both alliances matched up on level, attack trophies, and “adjusted god power rating”. Once ten willing participants from each side were decided such that both teams matched up, I posted my excel spreadsheet tables and calculations at Line app in a group we created specifically for alliance wars. It was a fun group because it brought together two alliances that started to get to know each other and become friends. FWP was a lot more relaxed about the stakes, but Heathens was really pushing for the win. I remained in FWP but played the role of referee for the war. I would join Heathens for their battles and then head back to FWP for theirs.

The rules were determined for the wars and I made a YouTube video which spelled-out all of the rules. There were a handful of players that were disgruntled they hadn’t been

selected for the war, but there was no way to balance the teams with their inclusion. The rules were stated that there would be two attacks for each of the twenty players. One of the attacks had to be easy and the other attack was the player's choice. Revenge attacks were not to be included because they can be prepared for in advance. Assistants were capped at seven and the first violation was a redo, but subsequent violations would mean a disqualification for the attack. The assist cap meant that the attacker was still doing the heavy lifting, but there were enough assist spots open that players not participating in the war as attackers could still participate as assistants. Alliances also had to be highly-organized in assigning assistants to particular alliance war battles.

The winner of the war was to be determined through three separate tallies: most victories, most loot gained from the attacks, and most trophies gained from the attacks. There was the potential for a tiebreaker, and the conditions for dealing with a tiebreaker stated that the top player from each alliance would have to attack on hard (Zion vs. Sulkick). Exploits were accounted for by virtue of the fact that intentional trophy-dropping prior to an attack for an easier victory also meant reduced loot rewards from the easier base. The trade-off made it unnecessary to try and rig the system.

Lobo's Algorithm for Adjusted God Power Rating: Find a standard deviation calculator online. For each player enter all the stat values for each god (health, strength and the three powers). Find the 1SD range and take the low value. Take all the god's stats that aren't as high as that low value and calculate the collective difference. Add the stated god power levels to the collective difference and divide that value by the number of gods. This gives the adjusted god power rating which can then be used for setting up even matchups in an alliance war. In addition, an optional points system can be used instead of taking loot at face-value. The aggregate loot (stone and gold) is divided by the adjusted god power rating to determine points for that battle.

The alliance war took just over a week to complete and I made several trips back and forth between Heathens and FWP. Some of the players from the original roster required substitutes because one player wasn't interested in the event and another player had gone inactive. The readjustment worked out fine and the teams were kept balanced. The war was very exciting and had incredible build-up. It came down to the wire and the final battles decided the victor. All twenty attacks were victories and the final battles by Heathens factored in that the player's choice attack needed to be a hard. Most of the players had been attacking on normal for their second attack because a loss would have been devastating. In retrospect, the alliance war may have worked better if the second attack had had to be a hard battle, however this could also lead to one player being the downfall of the entire alliance. Heathens edged-out a victory with their last two attacks and it was Sulkick and the Heathens' substitute that put them over the top.

I headed back to FWP and let them know that I was staying with them as a regular player. FWP players weren't fazed by the defeat, but some of the Heathens players acted-out and were obnoxious and rude about the victory. I thought that this was poor and decided that

I probably wouldn't return to that alliance in the future. The prize was pretty silly and the losing alliance had to change their general description in the game for a week to whatever the victor decided. The FWP alliance description was temporarily changed to a banner promoting Heathens and directing players to join them. While I was at FWP I had been soloing mostly and once my trophies were higher I decided to jump back into queues, however, I found that there wasn't an equal amount of support for my attacks as other players. Perhaps, the players were disgruntled that they had lost the war, but more likely it was the fact that I had been soloing so long in the alliance that players had already got it in their head to not help me, even once I started assisting again.

Claquesous contacted me over YouTube and let me know that my prophetic scathing indictment of the May update and future of GoO was premature, and that the base pop attack style had not in fact been neutralized through the rebalancing tweaks of the update. He directed me to a subtle adjustment which made the base pop even more powerful as an attack style. I was now very excited about pushing for permanent top 100 player status. I had been farming for a long time and when a player farms they accumulate loot very quickly and easily. It seemed that if I was in the right alliance I might be able to do very well in trophies. I couldn't figure out which alliance would be the right fit. There were some alliances that I was not going to return to. I have made it clear through Line app and in my YouTube videos that I believed Arya's farming style was a bully tactic therefore it didn't seem appropriate to return to Sloppy Seconds. I had been critical of New Era for cornertenting exploits and other cheap, sweaty play. Firesmoke was out of the question. Having just left Heathens and FWP, there weren't many top ten alliances left to choose from.

Dominant Few had been renewed through K and Ash working hard at growing it and becoming active, consistent assisters once more. I had remained in contact with Ash on Line ever since leaving DF and now approached her about rejoining. I would first have to make amends with K.

CHAPTER 22

Alliance: Coming Home

Squashing the beef with K was a very easy thing to do. K still respected that I immediately left Sloppy Seconds to join him. Our conflict had mainly stemmed from us both having similar personalities. Ash told me on Line, "just come home, Lobo". I rejoined Dominant Few and it was like I had never left. Salem, Angel, and Spyder were still there and now the alliance was almost full. There were a few different cliques of players who often wander around together and they had stopped off at DF around the same time. DF was pushing for a top ten spot in the alliance rankings. I was pushing for a spot in the top 100 player ranking.

I took Claqueous's advice and started reworking my base pop style. The Hera Wrath was now even more devastating than before and after having farmed for over a month, my gods were much stronger overall. I was easily cutting down bases which had previously caused me problems. Beating top 100 bases was now the norm and players at DF were happy to assist an ambitious player who was climbing the ranks quickly. In fact, Claqueous (also a base pop specialist) joined me at DF which was very encouraging. He was kind of my Yoda figure in the game. Joining queues was fun and most of the players at DF were still excited about the game. I quickly made the top 100 and even pushed into the top 50 for the first time. My time at DF was going very well and our group at Line app was bustling with chat and people posting amusing memes, and such.

Near the end of August, was the highly-touted Mayweather Jr. vs. MacGregor boxing fight. At the Line group, K was arguing with a new high-level player, "Relentless" about how the fight would play out. I was in agreement with Relentless that a champion defensive boxer would easily defeat a burst and sprint style MMA fighter if following the rules of boxing – he would just wear the opponent down. K, on the other hand, was of the opinion that MMA was "real" fighting and a boxer wouldn't be able to adapt to a more advanced style of combat. I got to know Relentless over the following few weeks and then realized that his daughter was also in our alliance. "Dstiny" changed her name to "Enchantress". She had a great personality – friendly, but full of moxie. She was always assisting me and I believe that she liked the base pop attack style as it was a vulgar display of power and that was fun in the game relative to the widespread use of the carve style with its heavy reliance on the plodding slow push technique.

Since returning to DF, I was having problems with Angel. In real life he was a young teen and was a prime example of what Gary Alan Fine had observed in Dungeons & Dragons tabletop game culture in the 1980s. School kids have a different approach to interpersonal conflict than adults. Adults vent frustration on each other with the intention of not taking it personal or letting it permanently ruin relationships. Other adults witnessing these conflicts typically attempt to plead that hostilities be pushed aside and for conflict to end. On the other hand, young people typically use interpersonal conflict to jockey for social position themselves. Watch videos online at social media sites of high school fist fights and you will note that the fight would never have happened without the swarm of watchers goading the combatants into throwing punches. Angel was exemplifying this immature and selfish style while in DF. He would attempt to goad players into escalating their interpersonal conflict. At one point he did this with me and I left the alliance briefly. I received numerous messages at Line from DF allies asking me to come back. They let me know that they were also fed up with Angel.

Later, one of the larger cliques that had joined DF upped and left because Angel was unmanageable. For whatever reason, K and Ash would not correct Angel's behaviour. When I rejoined DF I kicked Angel to get my point across. But over time it became obvious that his bad behaviour was being sanctioned by the co-leaders of the alliance. I spoke with Enchantress at Line. She was also fed up with some of the silliness at DF. She

had bought her father's account and now had two high level accounts to play on. I had my two minis and a main account that was now comfortably in the top 100 ranking. The two of us decided to leave DF and start our own alliance. Prior to leaving, I decided to fire a parting shot on one of the players at the alliance who had never been helpful and generally had disdain for any player lower than him in trophies ("Gabe"). This fight which I instigated actually led to Ash kicking me from DF. At that point I knew that deciding to leave had been the right choice.

Dominant Few never recovered from all the exits around Angel and Gabe's anti-social behaviour. About twenty higher level players left within a month and a dozen more DF players went inactive. Recently, DF merged with another alliance in order to start fresh without player inactivity however within three days of their formation there are already a dozen inactive players, including Angel and Gabe. I reached out to K and Salem to join me at Legends but they rejected the offer. I decided to not renew contact with Ash because she kicked me from DF instead of discussing why I was lashing out at Gabe. It never feels good to burn your bridges, but I have found that in life these moments can earn the respect of others who quietly agree with your judgment. I was now going to be an alliance leader for the first time, and the responsibility would be mine to make sure players were cooperating and having an enjoyable experience playing the game.

CHAPTER 23

Alliance: The Rough Sex Show

As previously mentioned, I have been attacked online in very serious ways. I have been DDoS'd and doxed, along with having my computer hacked through remote access. As such, I have learned that the ungoverned virtual space is not much different from the experience of being in a state penitentiary. If you do not conceal and suppress your real personality and real life values then there is a good chance that the knowledge of who you are will be exploited by malicious and violent individuals, and you will be attacked and hurt. I have crafted online personae which allow me to control my virtual experience when I am surrounded by the disingenuous and malicious. Instead of being the hapless Alice from Wonderland, I am a Mad Hatter. At the historical moment where online anonymity is removed, then my virtual persona will cease to be confabulation and act, and will become consistent with my real life personality and values. I feel so strongly about this philosophy and approach that I have stepped away from social media platforms which seek to conflate real life personality with virtual persona - in 2010, I stopped making regular use of Facebook and Twitter, and I am very careful about where my legal name is published online (even my LinkedIn uses an online alias).

I did not know who Enchantress really was when I agreed to leave DF with her and found our own alliance. We texted on Line and she had photos at that site which suggested that her online persona was consistent with her real life. I made the alliance and named it

“Rough Sex”. To be frank, it seemed like a name which was achieving multiple goals for me and Enchantress. It was a way of thumbing our nose at Miss Ashlee based on our shared opinion of her loose values in the global game community, it was sending a direct message to Angel and other immature, young players that we weren’t the right alliance for them, and it was a way to make clear to the top ranked players that Enchantress and I had left DF on our own terms. Surprisingly, the devs did not flag our alliance title or force a name change. Players started joining the alliance but none were known to us. Within a few hours of the alliance forming I had a sudden bout of anxiety. I felt as if I was back in Firesmoke once more. I had a nagging thought that Enchantress was not who she presented herself to be and that I was being set up to fail in starting an alliance with her.

I asked her for a link to her Facebook which she provided, but the profile looked very illegitimate (few friends, wide range of ages, all different locations, almost no photos, and no real friends commenting the photos). I got cold feet and folded the alliance immediately. Enchantress messaged me on Line trying to understand what happened. She had been suffering similar anxieties and thought that I was drawing her away from DF on purpose to alienate her from those players, meanwhile I would be returning to them. We did a video call that night and spoke face-to-face for the first time. This came as a great relief for both of us. I said that I would make a new alliance and she said that she would sleep on it and join once she felt comfortable again regarding my unfair rejection of her.

I made a new alliance and this time got real creative, naming it “Raw Sex”. Enchantress joined and over the following month we became half full with useful, active players. We also had minis of top players visit us. Many of the top female players visited and told me privately that if I changed the alliance name that more players would probably join. For whatever reason, I trusted this nonsense advice and eventually convinced Enchantress to do a name change. Changing alliance names is relatively unprecedented in GoO because the devs would assume that there would likely be a lack of consensus therefore they would be changing the experience for many players that didn’t appreciate those changes. With my request, the alliance name was instantly changed from “Raw Sex” to our new choice, “Ragnarok”.

Immediately after the alliance name change, players in the alliance expressed that they were upset about it. They had really liked the adult title because they claimed it indicated that the alliance was fun, for adults, and didn’t take itself too seriously. I face-palmed over the fail and scrambled for an adequate solution. I spoke with Enchantress and we agreed that we had been duped by some of the minis who had visited us. While the name fiasco was playing out, Enchantress and I became concerned that our alliance was pervaded with troll mini accounts. We were the unofficial “Brangelina” couple of GoO and it made sense that we would have picked up some nasty paparazzi along the way. It may have been paranoia (or vanity) but there were some signs to verify the legitimacy of a troll threat: players would jump out of queues as soon as I attacked, low level players were extremely competent at attacking, and one particular player would drop charmable

troops in an attempt to sabotage me in my battles. This duplicitous and suspicious behaviour was cause for concern.

In anticipation of an alliance nuking, I decided to kill two birds with one stone. Without conferring with Enchantress, I created a new alliance called “The Rough Sex Show” and I announced that all active players from Ragnarok should move to it. Moving cooperatively within forty-eight hours would equal an automatic promotion to captain. At this point, we had our fun, daring alliance name back while also insulating ourselves from a nuking. If all players were captain then it would be pointless to nuke the alliance because there were few citizens to kick. Enchantress and I announced that we would be promoting two players to general status at the end of December (on the 21st, and 23rd). One of our most suspect characters proceeded to rack up an enormous amount of assists over the following three weeks. When the 21st rolled by, I decided to promote another citizen to captain instead of following through with a promotion to general. Two days later, Enchantress did promote the prolific assister to general. I strongly suspected that this player was Miss Ashlee’s mini as her main account had suddenly gone inactive during this time back in DF. Prior to Enchantress handing out the promotion, I had mentally committed to merging our alliance with “JBone” at his alliance, “Fire of Sparta”. I had visited FoS several times between joining other alliances, and JB was one of my favourite players in the game.

We had about thirty active players who had the option to join Fire of Sparta and JBone had agreed to free up spots for all of us. Only a dozen players followed me while Enchantress and half of those then dropped out of FoS within a week of joining. I can admit that some of this sad sack behaviour was caused by my erratic upheavals and that these players were simply fed up with inconsistency in leadership. However, I think it would be fair to assume that many of the players who flaked out when we merged with FoS did so because their primary goals of nuking the alliance had been squandered. Of course, because of the anonymity afforded in virtual spaces, it is impossible to say for sure what was happening and such conditions tend to breed paranoia. All I know is that I made the right decision because a month later Enchantress and I were together again in the number one ranked alliance, Legends.

CHAPTER 24

Alliance: Legends

The Legends chapter is effectively still being written. The dissolution of my alliance happened around Christmas, 2017. The merger with Fire of Sparta took a few days and in the first week of January I had left to join the newly formed Legends.

Fire of Sparta was a full alliance with dedicated assisters and some high level players however Jbone was by far the best player in the alliance and the only top 100 ranked

player there. He was leader but didn't have the temperament to make unpopular decisions. He had expressed to me that he wanted me to stay because it was nice to play with another high level, skilled player (I was level 101 when I joined and he was level 102). My problems with FoS stemmed from some of the selfish, sweaty attitudes of several lower level players. JB had promised to make the alliance receptive to the merger with my alliance. We had been considered a "free-for-all" alliance because we had few rules about attacking and defending, whereas FoS had strict rules similar to those at Firesmoke. JB was more of an AC Slater type player and he didn't require special treatment, but a lot of the other FoS officers expected that allies would drop everything they were doing to assist on attacks and defense.

Some of my players from TRSS were scolded for attacking over defense. They left the alliance which eventually led to my two best players also leaving (Enchantress and "Dominant Sugar"). I had warned JB that I wouldn't be able to stay if all my allies were being pushed out. He tried his best to correct the bad attitudes of his players but it was too late. I ended up butting heads with a low level player, "Beowulf", who idiotically thought that his knowledge was equal to that of me and JB. I explained how sweaty defense has no lasting benefit and is extremely detrimental to personal player development as well as to the fun of many players in the alliance that want a more relaxed, open experience. He "corrected" me with non-sequiturs and nonsense, and I decided that instead of falling back into my old ways of verbally biting the head's off my opponents that I would simply walk away from the alliance. I didn't want to alienate myself from Jbone who I considered to be a friend.

I apologized to JB on Line and left FoS quietly. I then received a snide message on Line from one of the FoS generals, "Opie", who stated that he wasn't going to be told how to play the game and that he follows an "all's fair in love and war" type attitude toward gaming. I was thinking that I might simply uninstall the game as I had achieved virtually everything possible in Gods of Olympus. I spent some time perusing the alliance listing like I had done so many times before and to my surprise discovered that some of the top players had formed a new alliance, Legends. They were not yet listed in the top 100 alliance ranking but I found the alliance through the top 100 player ranking. It was an interesting choice for me. The alliance had been formed by some former New Era players, and New Era had been the alliance which was the most vicious and nasty to me the past year (I suppose they felt it was the other way around actually). What did I have to lose? It was try Legends, or quit the game. I thought that the alliance name was amazing and they already had some of the best attackers in the game. In a sense, this alliance had the potential to be exactly what I had always been looking for in the game. And that turned out to be true. I joined Legends.

The Legends leader was "Scorpion" who had been a player introduced to me by Miss Ashlee. Scorpion was a charming guy and very friendly with everyone in Line groups such as Global GoO chat. Warhammer was also a founding member of the alliance and was close to achieving the top player rank in the game. The other founding members were

“VIP”, “Rain”, and “Gladiator Slayer”. VIP was one of the best attackers in the game (along with Scorpion), Rain was a big personality just like me and he was a fan of my antics and commentary at YouTube as well as in Global GoO chats at Line. Gladiator Slayer was a player even more prolific than Mathrocks with respect to high-level accounts (I believe he has seven accounts in total and most are well-developed). It was a “bro” squad and most chat interaction started or ended with “bro”. I wasn’t normally the type of guy to go automatically to the bro level with people, but it felt really right with these guys.

Warhammer and I had been on bad terms in the past but we immediately saw an opportunity to work together and build a great alliance. Scorpion was an ideal leader because he never required special treatment but he also wasn’t aloof like AC Slater and other top attackers. Rain and GS have big, fun personalities and we immediately became a dynamic group. New high-level players joined and the jovial “Rico” (coming from New Era) became the team mascot in many ways. The original crew, who had formed the alliance prior to my arrival, had done some recruiting already and the alliance was getting new players and veteran players from all around the GoO player community. Within a week of formation, the alliance was in the top 100 rankings. I could see the potential for great success and decided that this was the first real opportunity to usurp the throne from New Era who had been rotting on their laurels for over a year.

We were like a band of brothers and we shared an ideology – to take the number one spot the right way. This meant that we didn’t want a lot of rules which made our allies subservient, but we also didn’t want players who relied on exploits to gain victories. We wanted an alliance of all skilled, solo attackers who would stop to help each other. We had that for a few weeks, but things changed slightly after getting top spot. First, I went on a recruiting spree. I messaged at Line dozens of elite, skilled attackers and high-level players who I knew from former alliances where we played together. Some players agreed to come over quickly when they heard the Legends MO while others needed some coaxing. Some players worried that Legends was volatile and that there was too much personality in the core team. Unfortunately, it turned out that the element which was too “extra” was me.

Within a few weeks, with the help of the core crew backing up my recruitment pitch, we added a good chunk of the best attackers in the game. I extended an olive branch to Dino and Kitten who agreed to join and bring their “litter” with them (almost ten accounts combined). Dino had had run-ins with me and Rain in the past but we all agreed to work together for the greater good of an alliance which could represent something positive in the game. We were able to commandeer the best players from the former Titan Slayers. Titan Slayers had recently disbanded and most of the players followed the high ranking female players who founded Janus. The best attackers decided to go to “Spartans” but they seemed uninspired. “Juice”, Greenicus, “Graecus”, and “MegaTheos” joined Legends which was a major coup however we quickly lost the latter two to Janus because there were apprehensions on the Legends core crew volatility. Juice and Greenicus stayed and

currently Legends has all top five ranked players in the game which includes those two (Greenicus is the top attacker in the game presently).

I have always made note of my favourite players and the players who I consider to be the best in raw skill and game intelligence. The list has now grown to include players like Scorpion, but for a long time my top five player picks or “All-Star team” was Greenicus, AC Slater, Sulkick, Clquesous, and Jbone. I managed to get Claq to join Legends and “Chaos” who was another of my favourite players who also signed up. Jbone decided to leave his leadership role in FoS and move to Legends. Many of his players followed him and this officially became a merger. The flow of FoS players to Legends took several weeks but it added depth in the middle of the roster which allowed us to come close to the top spot in the alliance ranking.

The problem with mergers is that the merging alliance is expected to conform to the rules and way of doing things established by the host alliance. This proved problematic with FoS and Legends. Legends prided itself as not prioritizing defense, and we allowed players to attack as much as they wanted, including posting attacks over top player defenses. This was culture shock for some of the FoS players but they came around quickly and recognized that they could form their own queues and ignore non-FoS players at Legends if it suited them. In addition, players like Opie came over and immediately went to work on building up authority and loyalty through assisting high level players. This is often a political move in alliance-based player dynamics and can be the undoing of alliances. The prolific assisters who don’t also attack often miss the nuances of competition in the game and their values become skewed. They aren’t invested in higher-order goals, therefore they are unaffected by styles of play which disrupt those goals in exploitative ways. Players such as Opie strongly believe in using exploits and any other tool available that can achieve victory. He is never on the receiving end in a way that matters to personal higher-order goal achievement in the game, so he doesn’t notice the cancerous nature of game exploits to competitive spirit.

Gods of Olympus has had a difficult time growing because exploits are rampant and skilled players will often quit the game once they realize that skill and ineptitude are rewarded equally (provided inept players turn to exploits). Without a boom in skilled players, the overall game population doesn’t grow which then makes it difficult or impossible for the developers to roll-out a regular schedule of updates with exciting new content. The corner tenting has been the bane of GoO’s development and it still boggles my mind as to why Aegis Interactive didn’t fix the code to remove the exploit and make AI behaviour more intuitive. It is a confounding oversight which I cannot explain to this day.

I have spent more than a year railing against the GoO player community’s flagrant use of corner tenting. I see the bigger picture of how it has stifled the overall growth and popularity of the game. My sensitivities are shared with virtually no players in the game (there are a few important exceptions, such as Rain and others in the core Legends crew) and when I argue against corner tenting in alliance chat or Line global chats it is often

perceived as an “angry, irrational rant”. As a virtual persona, Lobotomous is prone to such demeanor, but nevertheless it can get in the way of building healthy relationships in the game when legitimate points are mislabeled as tirades. Once Legends took the top spot and held it for a week, I started receiving messages at Line from multiple players expressing disdain for Legends and making claims that we were no better in our behaviour than the previous champs, New Era. This shocked me into sobriety and the celebration of achieving our primary goal ended.

I began getting reports that Legends players were jumping into other alliances to brag and berate opponents. I was then sent screenshots of Legends players corner tenting opponents. I was shocked and disgusted. Somehow, within one week our entire alliance philosophy had been flushed down the proverbial toilet. We had suspended our alliance philosophy in order to retain top spot which was a precarious balancing act to begin with. Players would leave and we would have to quickly find replacements to maintain our trophy advantage over New Era. We were begging players with high trophies like “Geo” to come back despite him being a scramble attacker of the highest order and one who openly demanded corner tenting support in alliance chat. Legends had lost its way, and all within one week of being on top. I could finally appreciate how capitalists and patriarchs become corrupt – often they achieve rightfully through hard work, dedication, and consistent vision, but then have to compromise on values to maintain their position, control, and power.

I was hell-bent on fixing Legends and posted in the announcements at the alliance that we were going to implement a strict rule of no corner tenting and that offenders would be demoted or kicked. I immediately received backtalk from Opie and a high-level player’s troll account, “Kleo”. I waited for the cavalry to arrive but I was on my own. Many of the high level generals understood that removing the sweaty dishonourable players would mean losing top spot in the alliance ranking. The original crew had always said that we didn’t want top spot if it was gained the wrong way – the New Era way. That seemed long forgotten now. There was massive backlash against my announcement by some of the lower level players and FoS players. Oddly, Mathrocks also ended up in an altercation on Line app the same day while Global GoO chat was nuked by “Smacky” who claimed to be representing the interests of all players that were against Legends. Smacky had apparently taken exception to the Legends player that had joined other alliances to brag (although Smacky is generally known as a petulant juvenile personality in the game).

The argument with Opie led to my implosion and I left Legends. The FoS players had quietly been racking up assists since arriving and they not only were sullying our reputation through their assist playstyle, but new players were learning these exploitative systems through them. Several players then threatened to leave too if I didn’t return. Some followed through on their threats which caused me to rejoin Legends. However, after trying to reconnect emotionally with the alliance, a day later I had left for an extended break. And that brings this auto-ethnographic survey up to the present moment. I am currently in limbo within the game – I caused such a stink that it is

inappropriate to return to Legends, but I also have little interest in being anywhere else. The decision to put my foot down on corner tenting and then leave the alliance when I wasn't fully supported by the core crew was made easier through the fact that I had sold my main account a few days earlier and was investing time on grinding up my top mini account. In other words, my leaving didn't affect the alliance standing in the ranks.

A day after the initial conflict with Opie over the new rule announcement, I had full support from the core crew. But, it was too late because I had made a huge mess in the global game community and the Legends Line group chat about my intolerance over the use of exploits. It was simply too shameful to return to Legends and the reality is that I don't actually want to play with a player like Opie. Opie showed no respect for my authority as a core member of the alliance and when I rejoined our alliance Line chat group to squash beef with him (shortly after the initial confrontation), he immediately took the opportunity to flaunt that he had enough clout to do what he wanted. Somehow within the merger, we had promoted players too high that didn't actually buy into our system – we were two distinct teams operating under the same banner. Jbone was put in a terrible position and was unable to properly mediate the conflict and in a sense he was the only player who could have affected a workable solution.

I will likely walk away from the game now and “chill out”. It has been an exciting and eventful journey through a unique social gaming experience, but it has come with many burdens (many I brought on myself). Early on, I had a choice - to either do as most skilled hardcore gamers have done and simply uninstall Gods of Olympus, or to try and change the game culture from within. I have been fighting a losing battle as it has been a tiresome attempt to instill competitive gaming values into a player community that simply doesn't value gaming competition. Legends compromised almost all of the skilled, hardcore GoO gamers that valued competitive spirit. The GoO community are mainly casual gamers and they do not play games at a competitive enough level to appreciate why the use of exploits ruins the experience and tarnishes the reputation of the game. My Xbox-based MLG friends will not play Gods of Olympus because they have limited experiences with the game which is enough to tell them that the game isn't competitive, especially in the ways that hardcore gamers require. As mentioned, through corner tenting exploits or scramble attack styles, the unskilled player can gain as much in-game resources as the highly-skilled players who master techniques such as the slow push or who can move all of their gods individually fluidly throughout a battle. Imagine the genius engineer being paid the same salary as a dim-witted buffoon who is liable to hit their co-workers in the head with a hammer through gross negligence, sheer incompetence and total lack of seriousness? - the engineer would stop working as the working conditions are unreasonable.

Gods of Olympus has a few options for recovery from the development side of things: more playable characters added, along with an alliance wars format and a base editor, and all implemented within the next year. However, this auto-ethnographic survey has approached understanding the game from a player studies perspective. The GoO game

culture is saddled with a schizophrenic value system: casual gamers employ exploits which hardcore gamers cannot abide. GoO has first-order goals and a core gameplay loop which affords hardcore gamers the potential for serious and rewarding competition, however the social interaction model and array of exploits make competition moot as rewards can be gained equally either from serious, skill-based play or frivolous, unskillful play.

CHAPTER 25

Assisting: “Playbour” in Gods of Olympus

The feature which distinguishes Gods of Olympus from the other games in its genre is the social function of being able to assist and defend allies in real time. Although, Clash of Clans remains the hegemon in this category of mobile strategy-based build-and-battle games, the social quality of CoC cannot compare to GoO. In GoO, there is a profound sense of community and comradery among players. Many players have a fulfilling and enjoyable time playing the game as assisters, while rarely attacking or seriously pursuing personal goals in the game.

However, GoO assisting has not been managed ideally by the developers. There are ways to assist which are exploitative and can ruin progress and enjoyment for opponents, while there are other ways to assist which can sabotage the attack of allies. Also, as previously mentioned, many alliances have developed formal and informal rules which make assisting a political-based issue, and assisting can become a cause for strife or conflict amongst players, if not simply being a drag and chore which slows down progress in the game and leads to a lack of enjoyment when playing.

There is a unique assist unit corresponding to each God in the game and they are unlocked with gold coins (the same resource used to unlock gods, unlock god powers, and upgrade gods). The game provides two basic assist units to new players – hoplites and archers but other units can only be unlocked once the corresponding god has been unlocked. Some assist units, such as Aphrodite’s “Awe Unit” are relatively useless, and updates to the game haven’t made appreciable changes. Other assist units have been rebalanced during updates such that sometimes they are made less powerful (Hera’s explosive “Vengeance Warriors”) or made extremely useful (Zeus’s AOE “Zap”). There are currently eleven different assist units in total and they can all be used for assisting on attacks or base defenses. Some units are more effective on defense (Ares’s tanking “Acolytes” or Poseidon’s long-range blasting “Tritons”) while others are most effective when assisting attacks (Hades’s swift “Skellies”). Apollo’s “Heal” assist is typically used only near the end of battles, whereby final temples can be granted some extra health when defending, or dying gods can be kept alive a little longer when attacking.

The final assist units are tents – Athena's hoplite tents and Artemis's archery tents. The tents will produce more units in total than the basic hoplite and archer assist units however the tents spawn foot soldiers one at a time. The tent has become a controversial assist unit for two main reasons: players exploit the steady spawning of units in order to trawl defending swarms to the corners of the map, and tents are usually showy where they work most effectively on attacks that were already won without them. Tents can be effective on defense especially when they are laid down in an arc pattern which surrounds the gods. A well-defended base may have hundreds more defense trophies than the same base which is never defended, and defensive trophies can fluctuate wildly based on the activity of the player and activity of allies in the alliance. Similarly, having just one assister on an attack can distract the swarm for the entire battle and help preserve the health of gods that would otherwise have died.

The advantages of having an active alliance as well as energetic, enthusiastic assisters, has led countless GoO players to become “sweaty”. Many players have expectations and a sense of entitlement about being repaid in assists for what they put in on their end. The reality is that people play the game on different schedules, with different amounts of investment, with different amounts of experience, and all while having to set priorities for assisting old friends or assisting newcomers in order to encourage them to stay in the alliance. Some days, I am only interested in attacking and find assisting extremely arduous, while other times I will only assist and provide that assistance to a wide variety of allies from newcomers to veterans, and from low level to the highest level players.

Each alliance is provided in-game with a public statistics list displaying how many assists a player has put in at the alliance since joining, or re-joining most recently. This list also tells players when the last assist unit was dropped for a particular player, and this becomes the basis for determining whether a player is inactive and needs to be kicked. A player may attack all day, but if they never assist then they are considered “inactive”. Therefore, activity in the GoO culture is based on social interaction. With that said, a player can assist their own base during defenses and these units count and will register the player as active. When leaving the alliance, the assist count is forgotten by the game. High-investment assisters usually receive priority in being assisted because most of the players in the alliance are familiar with those that have high assists and are used to seeing those players pop up in battle logs as assisters. This loyalty effect leads many players to being unwilling to leave their alliance and explore the broader community of the game. I have returned to alliances where I had been a prolific assister and it is conveniently forgotten by most of my allies who tend to follow the adage, “... and what have you done for me lately?”

The most glorious moments in GoO come when an alliance works together and supports one of its players in overcoming a very difficult base for their level. At the same time, all elite skilled players highly value the ability to “solo” (attack without assisters). Admittedly, there is a divide in the GoO culture between sweaty players, social players, and skilled players, and many alliances collapse when the disparate values of each group

come into conflict (recalling the work of Richard Bartle on MUDs). For the current alliance which I am a part of, dozens of veteran players have decided to officially de-emphasize assisting, especially on defense. This has made the community of this alliance more focused and cohesive where sweaty players are removed once they start complaining about not getting the kind of assistance they expect, and where players who are only interested in assisting because they will be assisted back on their attacks seem embarrassed to join because they are surrounded by skilled solo attackers.

The reality is that the majority of alliances in GoO over-emphasize assisting and this can lead to a lot of interpersonal strife in the community of those alliances as soon as a player realizes that they can deflect disappointment about their failed attacks and defenses onto their allies. In a sense, most of the top alliances have fostered elements of toxicity in their social interaction model. In fact, I have been given pause to remediate one of the seminal concepts from contemporary game studies – the portmanteau concept of “playbour”.

The game industry has been noted by academic scholars as drawing a lot of engineering labour free of charge from enthusiastic modders and hackers who play around with game code, creating new features, game modes, and patches for sloppy or negligent coding by in-house programmers at the studio. Critical Marxist thinkers in game studies have found the notion of playbour a sticky and ticklish phenomenon in the game industry, and the concept still holds weight in the field of game studies for theorizing the dynamic modes of meaning production of the game industry as well as global game culture. As service industry matures and AI continue to make human labour obsolete, game labour or “playbour” will proliferate more amateur forms of work in games. In a sense, assisting in GoO has a playbour quality whereby the player is doing work that is beneficial to other players without being directly beneficial to their own personal success in the game as it is determined through the core gameplay loop and higher-order goals.

Observing the dynamics of assisting in GoO, has led me to develop a particular structural schema as a conceptual tool for guiding an understanding of playbour in the more amateur, non-engineering-based aspects of game work (purely service based labour in games and without manufacturing-based elements). The schema identifies six categories of service-based work and unpaid labour in games. “Game Work” is labour based in personal development while “Game Play” is labour based in personal pleasure. The self is gratified and enriched through game work or game play. Set up as contrary categories to game work and game play, is “Game Chore” and “Game Gambling”. Where game work and game play provide a pay-off for the self, game chore is about development for an “other” and game gambling is about pleasure for an “other”, and it is the other who receives the pay-off. In alliances such as Firesmoke, the alliance rules about defending top players and suspending personal play to support the top players rendered gaming to a form of Game Chore labour. Nikki or Hanimmal were reaping the benefit of the work that the assisters put in, while the assisters themselves gained very little development or pleasure.

Admittedly, after defending the same base from the same attacker dozens of times, an assister may come to notice something about the attack strategy or the fundamentals of good base design however this kind of development is a plodding process. There will also be some measure of personal pleasure from helping an ally achieve victory, but it is not comparable to the pleasure from playing the game the way it was intended to be played (as an attacker utilizing the gods and unleashing the array of exciting god powers). With respect to player pleasure, dropping a tent can never compare with activating a Hawk Storm – it is simply a matter of control, power, and consequence as the tent is most often a relatively trivial contribution to the attack whereas the Hawk Storm is almost always essential. In fact, the ideology which supports the cornertenting exploit may develop through cornertents not being a trivial assist drop, and for players lacking the skill, constitution, or commitment to pursue first-order goals, the cornertent becomes a more critical contribution, despite also being an unskilled one.

For many of the players at my new alliance (“Legends”), the assisting that was based on strict alliance rules or maintained through the griping and whining of sweaty players simply rendered assisting to a chore. The development and pleasure was no longer personal and the work was being done for others first and foremost. The player that feels pressured to constantly assist will often have a difficult time deciding which battle to join because in full, active alliances there are constantly multiple battles posting on the board. It is a gamble in deciding which battle will be most fruitful to join as an assister and the majority of the pleasure reaped from a victory does not go to the assister (unless they are extremely social players that defer personal development through achievement of higher-order goals in the game).

At one point, while I was a general at Firesmoke, I wrote out an announcement suggesting to my allies that if they found assisting to be a chore then they should find another alliance to join. Soon after I realized that the statement was part of an internal dialectic because I was discovering assisting to be a chore. My progress was slowed down, and most defenses were defeats regardless of assisters defending. The majority of GoO players attack on the easy setting and therefore they receive opponents who should be beatable regardless of defenders. Defending was a lot of work for nothing, most of the time. This attitude which I am expressing has become commonplace in the game among GoO’s best attackers.

In the structural schema for playbour that is being offered, I also recognize contradictory categories to Game Work and Game Play – Game Fritter and Game Addiction, respectively. Where game work is about development, game fritter is a lack of development. Often game “completionism” is a form of fritter and action sequences in the game are repeated ad nauseam simply to unlock easter eggs or other in-game achievements. The development curve for those action sequences will taper off at a certain point early on. Many FPS (first-person shooting) games experience game fritter whereby players will replay the same maps hundreds of times, taking up the same positions and moving through the map using the same patterns. Once certain skills or

knowledge are honed or implemented to near-perfection then the repeated action sequences become routine and the development process has more-or-less ended.

Game addiction is a contentious term in game studies and most often associated with effects schools or hypodermic models on game communication and experience. For my purposes, game addiction is a form of playbour and is the inverse of Game Play. Where game play is about personal pleasure of the player, game addiction is a lack of pleasure and is defined as compulsive behaviour which does not serve the individual – the individual serves the addictive behaviour. Although it is possible to conjecture on the tapering off of development with playbour (game fritter), it is impossible to properly cite examples of game addiction because pleasure is an affective order at the individual subjective level. In GoO, I have experienced one distinct instance of game addiction when designing new bases. There have been occasions where I redesigned my base half a dozen times over the space of several hours. There was no pleasure in this activity and I cannot formulate a proper explanation for the compulsive behaviour – in some ways I was attempting to design a base that would be an improvement on the previous one, but primarily I sense that I was simply chasing after patterns (probably unconsciously registered from having contemplated the bases of other players in the game). I don't remember as a child, building a Lego construct and then immediately tearing it down without taking the time to use it and enjoy its architectural design. It seems that this addictive behaviour has infected my adult psychological and manifests at times through games such as Gods of Olympus or Clash of Clans.

With any structural schema, when put into practice the categories will experience bleeding-over and other forms of conflation or hybridization. The structure offered is merely a conceptual tool to help guide a useful and productive approach to understanding service-based playbour in contemporary gaming. In Gods of Olympus, the different forms of playbour are supported through alliance ideologies.

CHAPTER 26

Assisting: Alliance Ideologies

What a remarkable difference there was playing at Firesmoke as opposed to Sloppy Seconds, or Fire of Sparta as opposed to Legends. The alliance that I founded with Enchantress was a free-for-all alliance which meant that there were virtually no rules. We had a few rules to instill comradery and respect: if a teammate is being swarmed by the opponent's assisters then type "SOS" into citizen chat and join the battle in support of the ally. That was the only hard-and-fast rule at the alliance and all other rules were more useful tips or suggestions to make sure that players were learning the game's basics. I was extremely intolerant of players who ignored SOS calls and this is exactly what had provoked my conflict with Gabe that then led to the end of my relationship with Dominant Few and Miss Ashlee. I couldn't stop a player from ignoring an SOS situation

but I could at least remove players who attacked over SOS situations. Fortunately, this never came up at my own alliance nor has it been a problem at Legends so far.

The informal rules or suggestions at my alliance were to not drop assist troops prior to the first god being dropped on the map (a common suggestion at alliances), to try and help with revenges as much as possible, and to not drop “charmable” assist troops if Aphrodite (when defending) or Aphrodite monument (when attacking) were still active. These suggestions were intuitive and players who didn’t recognize their value would be dead weight at the alliance. It is usually the case that once a player is informed of these rules, they adhere to them. When assist troops are dropped prior to the first god being dropped, then defense structures activate, defending troops are spawned, and a swarm begins to form. Forming a defensive swarm prematurely can be detrimental to an attack because the mini-swarm can then flank the gods with the new major swarm on the other side, and the gods will be pinned-down. In addition, Hera’s Wrath can quickly wipe out many defensive structures which would have never had the chance to spawn troops, but this advantage is squandered if those troops have already spawned through assisters dropping units early. Helping with revenges is extremely important because the base is known, the attack can be planned, and assisters can be gathered ahead of time. There is a much better chance of achieving victory with a revenge attack than when facing the same base through regular matchmaking. In addition, most players attack on easy which means that revenge attacks are usually the tougher bases that a player will face and they come with more loot than the bases that a player will be facing when attacking on easy. Finally, not dropping charmable troops while Aphrodite or Aphrodite monument can convert those troops is a no-brainer, and when players don’t adhere to this suggestion they are doing more damage to their ally than the enemy is.

These suggestions which were included in the set of rules at my alliance are also well-recognized and have widespread application in the game. With that being said, my problems at Fire of Sparta occurred when I tried to explain the logic of these rules to some underachieving players who were suiciding their allies through poor assisting. It was Beowulf who jumped in and arrogantly proclaimed that all forms of assisting are positive and productive, and that any player who complains about the help they get should no longer get help, and later it was Opie who emphasized a libertarian ethos regarding the freedom players should feel to assist whatever way they want. Of course, I agree that a player outside of an alliance should be able to play whatever way they want, however being in an alliance means cooperative play which implies a form of Social Contract tied to the ludic aspects of gameplay. I did try to reason with these players but the snide contempt and arrogant stubbornness was unassailable. I spoke with Jbone about it and he expressed his frustrations of having to deal with players like Beowulf. Of course, in the end, JB joined me at Legends and brought almost all of the experienced, sensible high-level players from there with him. Free-for-all alliances are relaxed and enjoyable, but it is difficult to achieve personal and collective goals – individual players have a difficult time recruiting assisters because most players just want to run their own

nectar, and alliances don't fill up quickly because many players who join notice players aren't helping each other.

My primary goals with forming my own alliance was to farm and accumulate loot, spend some quality time with Enchantress, find out which other veteran players really supported me (based on if they joined), train intelligent players to reach higher levels of achievement in the game, and also to avoid being around players who I considered to be toxic to play through their ideological approaches to the game. What I discovered was that some of my mentee allies began to mimic me both in attitude and playstyle. Many of my new allies adopted the base pop style while Enchantress and I helped them develop their style into something powerful and efficient, where we gave them advice on upgrades, movement techniques, and god unlock order. Some of those players are still with me at Legends and my experience with them has been similar to a work apprenticeship. Other players at my alliance started to buy into my values on the game culture where they began promoting the alliance rules through their own play and also through chat conversations with players that joined.

Free-for-all alliances promote highly individualistic play and the nice thing about this is that the alliance is not pervaded by collectivist-based ideologies which will inevitably alienate and marginalize outliers or players who value individualism as well as collectivism. I have noted some collectivist alliance ideologies which do not seem alienating and that do not pervade inequities among players. Titan Slayers had a laid back attitude toward collective play. Players were allowed to attack when they wanted and as many times as they wanted without the fear of being chewed-out by officers. Defending bases was de-emphasized and eventually it became a problem because some players felt that they would enjoy the game more if their battle log had defense victories (usually from overwhelming force from defense assisters) and if their own defense trophies were higher. The officers at Titan Slayers implemented a "Defend Wednesday" event, where on Wednesday players would stop attacking in order to defend allies. This turned out to be an inadequate half-measure as a few months later Titan Slayers dissolved with the skilled attackers going to new alliances and the remaining players forming Janus.

At Legends, our officer class is made up of some of the most hard-nosed, thick-skinned, elite attackers in the game. We don't take guff from low level players and we don't compromise on the rules which we all believe in. One of our rules is, "no complaining". We allow some transgressions and seek to correct and redeem players through chat, but self-entitlement is a powerful urge in a game based around the potential (and expectation) for reciprocation. Some players have learned the ropes while others are a lost cause. I often tell the petulant, self-entitled players to join "Halfbloods" or "Firesmoke" because I honestly believe that those alliances are structured to handle juvenile player attitudes and corny, soap-opera-esque, acting-out behaviour (or "snowflake" behaviour to be more concise). Legends doesn't impose rules about defending and we suggest that players try to help wherever possible. This is the key to defense not being a chore or duty. There are always wrinkles in the operating model, but the core generals and leader of

Legends have emphasized that we are building a team of one hundred like-minded players. We are not afraid to kick players that don't fit in, and in that respect some could accuse us of having a "fascist" ideology. We are flexible players but have all been through enough drama and nonsense that if we have to deal with it any longer, most of us will just uninstall the game. I don't consider the Legends alliance ideology to be a negative or destructive one, but we are a team geared for particular playstyle and personalities.

On the other hand, I do consider there to be anti-social alliance ideologies in GoO. I will highlight three in particular, based on their influence in the higher ranked alliances. These alliance ideologies are: sweaty, nesting, and snowflake. Lower ranked alliances can have some unique anti-social ideologies as well, where some alliances are based around cheating and hacking, and others are the aforementioned cults of personality where one or two high ranked players call all the shots and the rest of the players are star-struck minions and cult followers.

Sweaty

The sweaty alliance ideology is an anti-social one and is based in a "win-at-all-costs" attitude as opposed to valuing the notion of, "it's not whether you win or lose, but how you played the game". Some attribute the sweaty ideology to a "competitive spirit" but often sweaty play is underhanded and disrespectful play thus foregoing the possibility for healthy competition. My conflict with players in the game began with my falling out with Firesmoke, however that alliance remains hermetically-sealed and most of the players there have never been a part of any other alliance. It was once I joined Sloppy Seconds that I also became active at Line app and was added to the Global GoO chat group there. One day, the player who I admired the most, "Greenicus", posted in global chat a polite request for New Era players to stop corner tenting every single battle they assisted in. The corner tent exploit rendered good base design obsolete and it also tied-up defending allies who could be doing more to help in other battles that were winnable. Corner tenting also makes it so that the attacking player isn't doing the heavy lifting and it isn't a matter of skill in gaining victory when this exploit is employed. Unskilled attackers were rising in the player ranks through the corner tent exploit and it was delegitimizing the game.

At Firesmoke, I had been a corner tenter when assisting allies. The officers at Firesmoke only cared about alliance rank therefore they had no objection to the use of corner tents. Once I left that alliance, I realized how deplorable the use of the exploit was. I vowed to never use the corner tent (although I occasionally used it ironically against particular players and alliances), and when Greenicus made his plea in global chat I got behind him fully. He didn't need my support as he was recognized as the best attacker in the game, but when New Era players responded to his request with mockery, disdain, and insolence I decided to take a jab at them in return. I identified the sweaty ideology, however at the time I labeled it "gambling fetishism" and suggested that players who came from nations which were in economic turmoil were prone to forming alliances which privileged the sweaty ideology.

In retrospect, I believe that “sweaty” is the apt descriptor and although it is factual that the worst offenders are foreign-based alliances, the sweaty ideology is not exclusive to foreign-based alliance or alliances from economically-struggling nations. Any player can be sweaty and that attitude toward play can permeate any alliance. Sweat often has a cascading effect among invested game players and sweatiness is present in all forms of competition from games to business.

New Era is the definitive sweaty alliance and their top players truly believe that a win is worth the same no matter how it was achieved. The sweatiest player in the game is “Volkan” and he is the backbone of New Era. Volkan uses a variety of exploits, including some which no other players use (likely because they require a mod). The irony of New Era sweat is that their players aren’t very good for their level and this may hint at the reasons for using exploits liberally in the first place. It has been an extremely unenjoyable experience playing a game with players that subscribe to sweaty alliance ideology. Competition seems moot when there are so many players who will stoop to disrespectful and exploitative play in order to achieve victory. Alliances like Legends, make it very clear to their players that cornertenting is not acceptable and we have allowed top 50 ranked players the opportunity to leave us without attempts at reconciliation when they demand cornertenting support. At Legends, we would rather lose than win unfairly or through making our opponents feel that the game is broken. We are fans of the game and hope to see it grow, which is unlikely when good game values are being trod upon with gleeful ignorance or malicious disdain.

The sweaty alliance ideology purveys an attitude of win-at-all-costs however this does seem to forge strong relationships among like-minded players. New Era has secured dozens of incredibly loyal players who simply want to be on top no matter how it is achieved, When Legends took over the top spot it was a victory for us but also for positive, social values in the game. Sweaty alliance ideology is about mob rule and it creates a toxic community through its underhanded bully tactics. It is my belief that Gods of Olympus will not grow if exploits are not addressed promptly. I have sent several letters to the developers making suggestions for viable solutions to the cornertent exploit, but to date they have been ignored. I remain confused as to why this exploit has been ignored especially given the debates on its use at the official forums. Cornertenting is one tactic for reinforcing sweaty alliance ideology, but there are others. The Scramble attack style is also part of a sweaty ideological mindset for players and the success of scramble attacks are often heavily-reliant on cornertenting support.

Nesting

The nesting alliance ideology is another which I consider to be anti-social. Nesting refers to alliances which prioritize defense because it is a more passive way to play the game. There are alliances with casual players in the leader role who seem to find that attacking is aggressive and unappealing. Defense assisting becomes a substitute for attacking and

alliance rules reiterating these priorities in no uncertain terms. Earlier, I identified three types of player persona in GoO (skilled, sweaty, and social) and nesting alliances are usually filled with “social” GoO players. When joining these alliances, I have noted that if players are given the choice to join an attack or a defense they will join the defense. In addition, if there is a new allied attack launched many players in nesting alliances will simply continue chatting as opposed to join the battle in support. The nesting ideology recalls Bartle’s “socializer” playstyle from his study of MUDs (skilled player persona would be Bartle’s “achievers” playstyle, and sweaty player persona would be his “killers” playstyle).

Nesting ideology is obvious if you start to notice the bases which were supposed to be difficult but were not in fact. When I attack on normal or hard and face a Janus base it is a cause for premature celebration because it is often like facing very easy but I get rewarded the trophies for facing what was supposed to be a much more challenging base. The reason that these bases are relatively easy is because their defense trophies are inflated. However, the trophies are inflated because Janus will often defend en masse and the battle will be equivalent to a normal or hard if Janus defenders come out in droves to protect the base. Another way to check for nesting ideology is to examine your battle log and see which battles had considerably less stone reward. In my log, I may have ten normal battles and each base rewarded over a million stone except the Janus bases. The nesting ideology is considered anti-social in two respects: it causes Game Chore playbour (local effect), and prioritizing defense slows player progress in the game (global effect).

If an individual player want to emphasize assisting or assisting on defense (“Miss Drea”, for example) then there is nothing wrong with this per se – individualist-based nesting ideology is not anti-social. However, the alliance adopting a nesting ideology renders many players to a grunt labour force. Janus has been slandered for being an alliance of “cucks” because it is well-documented that they have a disproportionate number of high-level female players, those players are not very skilled attackers for their level, and the defense trophies of their bases is much higher than better designed bases of players at the same level. The female players are earning rewards through the work of their legion of male subordinates, so it is claimed. Usually, a nesting alliance ideology privileges a few higher-ranked players and this was the case in Firesmoke.

Snowflake

The snowflake alliance ideology is arguably more toxic than the sweaty ideology. The sweaty ideology is often about collective brute force and underhanded ploys achieved only through teamwork. It is a “we” philosophy about success in the game and it exemplifies mob rule. Nesting is also a “we” philosophy but it is passive instead of aggressive like the sweaty ideology. However, snowflake alliance ideology is a “me” philosophy toward the game which is also aggressive in expression. The snowflake ideology is one which emerges from a sense of low self-esteem whereby a player’s base being attacked is considered a personal affront and personal attack against the player.

Perhaps real life assets and achievements are conflated with the virtual, and these players feel more invested in their base as “property” or “sanctuary” than they do about their actual home in the real world. Conjecture aside, snowflake ideology leads to petulant pleas for defense support in chat and self-entitled complaining when defense support is not provided. It is as if the player truly believes that their opponents are ganging up on them with assisters and them mocking their defeat as a sign of the defeated player’s powerlessness.

I cannot relate to the snowflake ideology and when K and I worked together to form Dominant Few it was very important that we remove the players who had snowflake personalities. The first new rule at Legends once we filled up with players was to get rid of complainers. There are many players in GoO who expect their allies to protect their base as a priority, and through conversing with these players in chat it seems evident that the anxieties are related to interpreting the social interactions in the game as being more significant than they are. A defeat in the game is treated as a real world slap in the face and the snowflake player holds allies responsible for having been indifferent bystanders to the attack.

Once you become a veteran player in the game, you tend to stop taking defense losses personally and at Legends the core crew openly state in chat that our bases require no defense support. In this way, we attempt to teach lower level players that base defense is not something to get hung up about. However, there are many alliances built around the snowflake ideology. In fact, Fire of Sparta was one such alliance, and once Jbone left there to join Legends, Fire of Sparta had only those players who believed in the snowflake alliance ideology remaining. A general who stayed in FoS made an official announcement that players would no longer be allowed to attack at all if there was a defense available. This is problematic for several reasons including the fact that GoO does not have dedicated servers and it can be extremely difficult to join matches in progress. The active battle queue in alliances states how many minutes have elapsed in attacks and defenses that are still in progress. For myself and many others, there is absolutely no point in trying to join matches that have been in progress for three minutes or longer – we will simply be stuck in the loading screen for longer than the actual length of the battle.

Snowflake ideology pervades FoS and it has had a residual effect on the players who left and joined Legends. These players sincerely believe that defense matters and it is worth making the effort to spend hours defending bases. The math and logic is quite clear – players attack on easy, even the most active alliances have hours-long stretches of quiet time, and attacks are being run all day long throughout the game. Inflated defense trophies require considerable effort to maintain and does not compare to the impact of strengthening a base through running a series of attacks and pouring the loot reward back into the base in the form of upgrades or new defense structures. I have often had the highest defense trophies for my level and it relates to high activity and good base design. Allies defending my base can temporarily increase my defense trophies, but it is a volatile gain and will always fall back to where it should be based on the bases natural defenses.

The three anti-social alliance ideologies have a different impact on allies than on opponents. The sweaty and nesting alliance ideologies consolidate the alliance members with only competitive and individualist types of players having a detrimental experience. Sweaty ideology discourages real competitiveness through its promotion of exploits while nesting ideology makes it challenging for players to feel free in pursuing higher-order goals in the game. Sweaty and nesting ideologies in GoO tend to only alienate outliers. Sweaty ideology oppresses players outside of the alliance while nesting ideology does not. On the other hand, snowflake ideology causes discord, conflict, and confrontation within an alliance. Players complain to each other and accuse each other of failing in providing support. It is a down-in-the-mouth approach and I am not aware of any snowflake players among the top fifty ranked players in the game. Snowflake ideology seems to emerge among collectives of unskilled players who don't have notable achievements in higher-order goals and so all in-game success depends on base defense victories. Other alliances will unlikely be affected by snowflake ideology and it presents only internal turbulence and struggle.

In a sense, my first alliance, Firesmoke, had all three anti-social alliance ideologies operating at once. Firesmoke was sweaty and was comfortable with the use of corner tenting exploits provided that it led to victory. The official rules set up by Nikki and the generals prioritized defense and the top ranked players in the alliance had inflated trophies while hours went by where players were not allowed to attack because there were bases to defend. Finally, there were snowflake players such as PeteyGunz who were allowed to complain in chat about not getting enough support. At the time, Warhammer and other generals also expressed in chat that we shouldn't allow our opponents to "beat up" on our bases and that not defending made Firesmoke look weak and ineffectual.

At Sloppy Seconds, there was very little sweat, it was certainly not a nesting alliance as it had a large portion of the game's top attackers, and complainers were immediately booted by hard-nosed players such as Arya and Mathrocks. Dominant Few adopted much of the Sloppy philosophy with regard to alliance ideology but attempted to teach new players more and was flexible in understanding the different experience of the game that lower level player had compared with high level players. Heathens were nesters and pretty sweaty while FWP ended up resembling a nesting alliance by virtue of having a large number of individual-based nester players. FWP was more like Titan Slayers and was a reformed free-for-all alliance resistant to nesting but both alliances had attracted a fair number of players who embraced the nesting ideology. My own alliance was free-for-all and was geared toward rejecting snowflake and sweaty ideologies. We also didn't care about defense and prioritized attacking and assisting attacks. Fire of Sparta was a move in the wrong direction for me and my closest allies because it was a snowflake alliance which endorsed sweatiness to achieve its snowflake goals. There were several nesters in FoS as well. Legends has aspired to be the most refined in reformed free-for-all alliances.

There was a crisis once Legends reached top spot in the alliance ranking and in order to maintain our position we started to allow sweaty play although we still didn't put up with snowflake complaining and demands. We were not nesters in the core crew, but the merger with FoS shifted the balance slightly. Legends has made a concerted effort to return to the original mandate of reformed free-for-all, but has had to surrender the top spot in doing so. One might say - it is better to have played well and lost, than never to have played well at all.

CHAPTER 27

Playstyles: “Play Approach”

I have already reviewed some playstyles for attacking (attack strategies) and I identified the three primary attack playstyles as Carve (Big 4), Base Pop, and Scramble. There is a surfeit of variations on these attack playstyles. I also identified three primary player persona types in Gods of Olympus, which were skilled (playing to learn and master), social (playing to assist and socialize), and sweaty (playing to win and dominate). Finally, a few prevalent alliance ideologies were listed and explained: free-for-all, reformed free-for-all, sweaty, nesting, and snowflake. A free-for-all alliance will likely attract skilled players who probably don't use the scramble attack style, whereas a snowflake alliance will typically have social and sweaty players who scramble attack. However, there are also general playstyles or “play approaches” for Gods of Olympus players. I have taken some liberties in marrying the GoO play approaches with the playstyles which Richard Bartle identified in his work on early MUDs.

Bartle uses the term “playstyle” to describe a player disposition (or persona) as well as approach in playing a game. These playstyles are not about particular strategies per se but focus on the general approach to the game that a player takes, therefore I will substitute “play approach” for “playstyle” when remediating Bartle's work, and I will retain “playstyle” as a term to describe particular strategies used in GoO for attacking, defending, and assisting.

There are four major play approaches to playing GoO and it is difficult to imagine any exotic approaches lying outside these four, although players will switch between the approaches readily and may experience affinity toward particular approaches which can result in hybridization. The four play approaches in GoO are Pusher, Farmer, Assister, and Smasher. Pushers are always striving for achievement in the higher-order goals of the game and this can be compared with Bartle's “achievers”. Farmers are oppositional to pushers and they forego achievement in higher-order goals for the purposes of exploring nuanced or yet undiscovered aspects of gameplay (this would be Bartle's “explorers”). Assistants primarily play the game to make friends and help in battles, and this approach is comparable to Bartle's “socializers”. Finally, smashers play to have convincing, dominant victories against their opponents (they are Bartle's “killers”), and where assistants de-

emphasize attacking, smashers make it a priority. GoO alliances will often have a mix of players using different approaches at any given time. Bartle claimed that all four of his approaches (playstyles) had to be in balance and that if one became depopulated in the player community then there was destabilization for the other three. With GoO, there is a similar precarious dynamic relationship with the four approaches.

Pushers

Pushers in GoO are players who are “pushing trophies”. When a player is attempting to break previous personal high records in trophies, they will focus on attacking and defending. High level players with very high attack trophies for their level but nerfed bases will be unlikely to make the top 100 player ranking. Defense trophies have to be decently high even for the best attackers if a player wants to compete for the top 100 player ranking. Pushers will assist a fair amount because it means that they are recruiting assist help for their own battles. Pushers will tend to attack on easy until easies become very difficult even with assist help at which point they will start to attack on normal in order to avoid taking a greater loss in trophies when they run into well-defended bases (easy loss is 23-29 trophies while a normal loss is 14-19, typically). A well-defended base on easy difficulty can often be more challenging than an undefended base on normal difficulty once a player is pushing their maximum attack trophies. In addition, the gains on winning normal battles can help push a player past their previous best.

Even if the overall approach is to be a pusher, these players will alternate with the other approaches. The pusher may farm for short periods in order to gain loot quickly battling easy bases where the loot is used to make important upgrades to their base or offensive strike team of gods. The pusher may also stop participating in queues and round robins in order to face the same base multiple times, learn an effective and efficient route, and master that route (ie. smasher approach). The pusher may also spend significant time as an assister in order to build up loyalty for later when they start doing their push again.

I’m not sure that there is any player that is always a pusher, but they would undoubtedly most likely be found in alliances with a sweaty ideology. The only player who comes close to being a perpetual pusher is Geo and I can’t say that I have ever seen him farm. Geo moves alliances a lot but only stays if he is getting a lot of assist support. Some top players who have now retired from the game were pushers almost always. “Felix” was an alliance leader who had continuous support on defense and he always maintained his attack trophies as high as he could get them. “Ali” was another player who wouldn’t farm and instead constantly pursued the higher-order goals of gaining personal trophies. In fact, Felix and Ali pushed so hard while they were playing that they remain in the top 100 player ranking today even though they have both been inactive for at least two months. It might be argued that constantly pushing burns out a player and this might be why Felix and Ali quit the game. Arya once expressed to me that pushing all the time is a draining experience and not worth the effort.

Farmer

Farming is something that usually happens at critical moments for a player in Gods of Olympus. Players will often farm when they are bored with the game and tired of investing mental energy and physically exerting themselves on attacking at a competitive level. Players might also farm if they are finding the pressure to assist onerous. Players using any of the other approaches to playing the game may end up farming for short or long stretches in order to refresh their interest in main gameplay. Farming usually involves intentionally dropping hundreds of attack trophies in order to face unchallenging bases that can be defeated quickly. In this respect, farming is an efficient way to gain loot quickly however it requires that a player spend real money on the game in order to have gems for constant attacking.

Farming is about dropping attack trophies however it usually also involves a player nerfing their base if the player was farming to take an extended mental break from the game. Other players will do short term farming in order to gain loot quickly for another push, therefore they will not nerd their base and sacrifice coveted defense trophies. When a player farms they will face many more bases per hour than when playing with the other three approaches and this means that the player gains a lot of experience quickly. Farming can be an effective way to practice new attack styles and I did extended farming sessions in order to hone the carve style as a second attack style that I could use competitively. It can be discouraging or embarrassing to practice and fail on bases of players that you consider to be natural opponents in the game (usually through being at the same level).

Most players farm for short periods but there are also toxic forms of farming. When I have farmed, I have dropped an unnecessarily large number of trophies such that the bases I face don't provide enough loot to be maximally efficient. I then progress back up the ranks attacking on easy and never stopping until I am a pusher once more. I am not taking many trophies off of my opponents in this way and I am not facing them multiple times within the space of a few hours. However, there are farmers who bring toxicity to the game and who farm in such a way that it is a form of bullying ("bulky farmers").

Bulky farmers are farmers who drop trophies but then attack on normal and hard despite the bases of their opponents being very unchallenging. They will keep their own base fully loaded (hence, "bulky") such that revenge attacks against them are pointless. Another defensive strategy of the bulky farmer is to nerd their base such that a revenge attack against them reaps no loot reward. Another offensive strategy of the bulky farmer is to drop trophies until the farmer is in a "sweet spot" where loot gained per hour is maximized. The farmer will then attack on easy but will drop every fourth or fifth battle to "friends" or former allies in order to remain in the sweet spot when attacking. This means that a player may lose to the same player a dozen times a day and defending is moot because the bulky farmer's gods are overpowered against the lower level base.

After railing against the corner tent exploit for several months, I changed the beat of my drum and went after bulky farmers. I attempted to “call them in” which proved to have no effect, and then I called them out hoping that a public shaming might work. This too failed and currently one of the highest level players in the game (Raphman) is being a spoil sport through bulky farming. Raphman singlehandedly negates all defensive gains for dozens of players every day and it has been going on for weeks. The developers have received formal complaints from multiple players, but they have responded by claiming that nothing can be done to stop Raphman from attacking. Of course, something can be done and should have been done long ago, in that trophies gained from a battle relate to player level. The matchmaking would remain based on attacker attack trophies being compared with defender defense trophies however when attacking players dozens of levels lower in development only a single trophy would be rewarded to the farmer. High level players would have to be careful about how much they drop in order to farm because it could take a while to get back into a competitive position when each battle reaps a single trophy.

After attempting to convince players to not bulky farm and after petitioning the devs about it along with sending proposed solutions, I myself decided to bulky farm. This was not done under the justification of “if you can’t beat’em, join’em”, but was instead about sending a message to the devs through the hope that they might receive complaints about me being a bulky farmer and this might alert them to the potential of the bully practice spreading infectiously. My heart wasn’t in it though and I went back to my original style of farming. Sometimes I drop and farm a few hundred trophies working my way back up fighting on hard or normal and sometimes I drop a thousand trophies and battle only on easy. As the game has become more depopulated it seems less important, and overall I haven’t been a player that farmed much.

There are some bulky farmers who are constantly farming and Arya is a top offender in this regard. There are other players who farm to explore different possibilities in gameplay. Players like Elkin do not farm to bully opponents but instead explore the possibilities of finding interesting new routes into a base or playing around with god order to discover how attacks might be coordinated through unique attack styles and strategies. Elkin has not been a pusher since I joined the game and he has now gone inactive citing that defense is pointless after the Hera and Poseidon updates. Elkin’s base designs were very efficient and he focused on his defensive success in the game.

It is quite obvious that pushers are required in a game for the community to have purpose. If no players are pursuing higher-order goals then everyone mine as well just interact in a chat room at Line. Farming is not self-effacing in its utility to player community dynamics and it might seem that it is unnecessary to have this explorer class in the game. However, farming is a way to make gains quickly which can afford greater opportunities when pushing. Farmers, in turning away from pushing or smashing have time liberated for assisting. Farmers also provide other players with opportunities to see the kind of bases and powerful gods which they will face once they progress in the game.

Watching replays (available in the battle log) of farmers attacking can reveal strategies and tactics or examining and attacking high level bases on revenges against farmers can lead to intense player engagement as players meet their toughest challenges and might gain important insights into good base design.

Farming is overall a positive, liberating, and enlightening aspect of GoO for both the farmer and their opponents, and the only problem that must be addressed is how to re-calibrate the trophy system so that bulky farmers can no longer exploit other players and bully a large section of the player community.

Assisters

Gods of Olympus has an issue with imbalance between casual gamers and hardcore gamers, and as a result of not addressing exploits the hardcore gamers have turned away from GoO and it has been taken over by casual gamers. This is a problem because the core gameplay loop and higher-order goals are geared for hardcore gamers therefore there is an upper limit to how many casual players will join the game. The game is a little too intense for most casual gamers and it requires a considerable amount of skill to feel competent as a player. Without a growing player population it has become difficult for Aegis Interactive to update the game with new content. Most of the casual players in GoO use the assister approach. Many assisters will also attack, but they usually need a lot of help from allies and they typically fall back on exploits and “cheesing” (scramble, corner tenting, walk-arounds with Apollo and Artemis).

Alliances with too many assisters (such as, Firesmoke or Fire of Sparta) have a very difficult time attracting high level players and especially elite attackers who usually approach the game as pushers or smashers. In environments such as this it is easy for the alliance to develop snowflake or nesting ideology which then perpetuates the imbalance in player approaches within the alliance. Free-for-all alliances tend to have few assisters but this too can be detrimental to the development of the alliance because players will lose battles more than they need to for lack of ally assisting, and many new players will leave shortly after joining because they aren't receiving any help in their battles.

Players can go into assister mode the way they can take periods to farm. Farming is a bigger commitment and will take days or weeks to complete even when it represents a short break from other play approaches. Turning to the assister approach can be a way to disengage from feelings of intensity for a few hours or even for a couple of days. I have often been pushing my attack trophies so high that I'm anxious that the next attack will be a loss. If I am enjoying my player standing in the ranks, I may take a break from attacking for a few days and just focus on getting my assist numbers up. This also makes things easier when I go to attack because many allies will remember my help and want to reciprocate.

Assisting is the backbone of the social interaction model for GoO, so the assister approach is one that almost all players will be familiar with. Some players barely attack themselves and simply assist (Opie or Miss Drea). An ally from Legends, "Suit", believes that he is refining a system for his assisting whereby he sees openings and opportunities for dropping particular assist troops in critical moments during a battle. I have over two hundred thousand assists in the game (decent, but top assisters in the game have over half a million) and I understand what Suit is driving at. There are occasions for particular assist drops where position, timing, and selection matter a great deal. There is certainly such a thing as a good assister and also a bad one.

Some players who are primarily approaching the game as assisters are also competent attackers and will attack regularly. My ally from TRSS and one who joined me in FoS and Legends, Dominant Sugar, is a prolific assister but she is also a skilled attacker. On the other hand, Reinhart is the highest level player in the game and since I joined in December 2016, he has been a true solo attacker, which means that he isn't in an alliance. In Reinhart's case, he never approaches the game as an assister and although he is able to defend his own base, I rarely see him doing so. I have often mentioned my interest at the forums in seeing the game add a Solo mode whereby all players would have the option to attack without assistance, without allies or opponents watching them, and without the possibility of defenders. Although I still believe that solo mode would be a great and necessary addition to the game, GoO would not have the same rich, complex diasporic cultural quality if the assister play approach was removed completely.

Smashers

I have played GoO as a pusher, farmer, and assister however I consider myself to be a smasher overall. I have been interested in reaching the highest rank possible for my player level and have on occasion been in that position. I have also farmed for different reasons and done long stretches as an assister for different reasons as well. Mainly, I smash bases with the base pop attack style. If I am enjoying my player rank on my main account and don't want to risk losing and dropping attack trophies, I will often link to ally accounts and smash with their gods, or I can use one of my two minis to do extended attack runs. Mini accounts are very useful for smashing as there is little pride lost when you are defeated by opponents that you consider to be much lower level than yourself (or opponents you have never even heard of). It doesn't really matter if I lose on my minis because my mini accounts have unknown names, they rarely interact in alliances, and they have little to no reputation in the game. Some players know who my minis are but most do not.

Smasher is the most aggressive play approach in GoO and it emphasizes attacking. Smashers will usually rely on base pop attack styles and will rarely fall back on the slow push which is plodding and passive. Smashers want fast attacks and a frenetic pace during battles. They will usually upgrade the gods who are the most devastating in dealing damage (Ares and Hera). I am such a dedicated smasher that I rely heavily on

Zeus as a brute tank. Pushers are more likely to use the slow push and Carve/Big 4 attack styles. They will emphasize upgrading the gods who are best at crowd control (Artemis, Apollo, Athena, and Aphrodite) and they typically neglect Zeus, simply using him for his Slow Time special power. Assisters are more likely to use scramble attacks and will min/max god stats which afford them opportunities to have quick takedowns of temples (Hades's Cerberus, Apollo's Sun Strike, and Artemis's Long Shot).

There are exceptions to these tendencies and some players who rely on scramble attacks or carve attacks will also be smashers. Geo attempts to win his battles quickly with the scramble while Zion smashes using carve style.

For Bartle the “killers” was a playstyle characterized as malicious and one which relied on “griefing” especially against socializers. Admittedly, I have been a proponent for reducing the number of casual gamers in GoO and focusing on changes to the game that would bring in hardcore gamers, but this doesn’t mean that smashers are toxic to the player community or that they grief other players through their play approach. Instead, the griefers in GoO are usually in the farmer approach (the bulky farmers such as Arya, Raphman, Roundy, or MacaPapaz). The bulky farmers are individual-based griefers, but alliances can also grief collectively through using exploits such as the cornertent. I would argue that New Era were griefers a year ago when all of their battles were won with cornertenting.

As much as Bartle may be correct with respect to his understanding that a game’s player community will have a variety of play approaches and they must be kept in balance, GoO currently has a problem with imbalance. There are too many assisters relative to the other three approaches and in the past year new content and major updates have rolled-out so slowly that many pushers and smashers have become farmers. Arya was once a pusher and has been farming for over a year, while Felix and Ali are pushers who simply quit the game. Smashers like Zion have now left their alliance and started ironic closed alliances to signal their disapproval of tardiness in updating (Zion created the “GoOtopia retirement home” alliance). Greenicus was inactive for over six months because of the cornertenting exploit’s rampant and uncontrolled use in the game. If GoO had more pushers and smashers (through adding hardcore gamers) then likely the exploits and cheesy play often turned to by assisters or farmers would seem less impactful on the community as a whole. With more skilled players, we wouldn’t be running into the cornertent as much.

CHAPTER 28

Achievement: How to Win at Gods of Olympus

“Winning” can mean different things in a game like Gods of Olympus and depending on play approach, attack playstyle, alliance ideology, and player persona/disposition then

there will be unique determinants for player success and achievement. A farmer has achievement from discovering what a long row of decorations can do for disrupting god positioning on the map during battle. A snowflake alliance has achievement when they successfully defend many allied bases consecutively. A scramble attacker has achievement when they are able to defeat a base without the assistance of corner tents. A social player may find that being thanked in chat for assisting is the achievement they most desired. However, GoO has higher-order goals such as gaining attack and defense trophies, or maxing god power or temple health. I cannot say how players “win” at GoO because it depends on what order of goals the player is pursuing in the game, but there are known factors for how to achieve and have success with the higher order goal of gaining trophies and making the top player ranking list.

There are four factors which will allow a GoO player to gain trophies in the game: spending money, spending time, having skill, and using exploits. When perusing the top 100 player ranking list, each player will have their position determined through a combination of all four factors. Players such as Overkill have claimed to have spent under one hundred dollars on the game. Overkill has been playing the game since it released so his top 20 player position in the game mainly reflects time spent and skill. There is an upper limit to what can be achieved with only those two factors. Overkill has been as high as tenth place and if his claims about frugality are true then he has demonstrated that a player can have incredibly high achievement in GoO without spending thousands of dollars.

There are high level players who pop-up out of nowhere and are suddenly in the top 100 player ranking. “Star Lord” and “Dream Traveller” still lack considerable skill in the game through being inexperienced at attacking and designing bases, as well as having not learned enough on the battlefield when assisting. They simply threw money at the game (dropping thousands of dollars) in order to quickly make the top 100 player ranking. In some ways it is a bad joke and perhaps should be mocked because these players are taking up a spot they didn’t earn. There are other players who worked hard and have the skill to make the top 100 list if only the “whales” like Star Lord and Dream Traveller didn’t exist in the game. It is easy to tell who the unskilled big spenders are because they have defense trophies much higher than their attack trophies. They often wield maxed out gods but fail on bases that should be easily defeated by an experienced player. It can make the game farcical to watch the pathetic scrambling of these unskilled whales.

With that being said, some whales also put in time and eventually acquire some skill. Warhammer has always been one of the biggest whales in GoO but he also always had a fair amount of skill to back up his ranking. He has stayed with the game and although he isn’t one of the best attackers, he can definitely hold his own against tough bases. Dino and Kitten were as incompetent at attacking as Star Lord less than a year ago, but with time spent on attacking and assisting, they have learned the game and are much more skilled in attacking today. There are other whales who are highly skilled (Juice and Reinhart). The top five money spenders in the game (who can be identified through

player level) have likely spent between ten thousand and twenty thousand dollars on the game. Most of them have confirmed this with me privately.

The next tier of whales are players like Star Lord and they have likely spent between five thousand and ten thousand dollars on the game. Other players such as Greenicus and AC Slater are at a very high level but they have also been playing the game a lot and for a long time. They undoubtedly spent a lot of money on the game, but they are also highly skilled players and make more loot per hour than most other players (if not all). Unskilled whales need not be berated if they have a positive attitude and are very helpful to the allies. Rico is a player who has spent thousands on the game and who lacks skill in attacking, however he liberally lends out his account to several skilled attackers in Legends and we get an opportunity to beat bases with his near-maxed-out gods which is something that would never be possible without his generosity. It can be a fun experience supporting players like Rico. One downside can be that without investment in becoming a skilled attacker, these whales often substitute a lack of achievement in skill with less appealing traits. Rico gets very sweaty about his defense and announces his losses constantly in chat. It can be discouraging for allies but Rico isn't bringing other things to the table apart from a very robust base. Dino and Kitten used to brag about the money they had available to spend on the game as a means of compensating for the fact that they lacked skill. As they have put in more time and become more competent as attackers, they have also ceased in flaunting their wealth in chat groups and alliance chats.

It is difficult to say how many of the top twenty players in the game deserve to be there based on skill as the dominant factor. If all players in the game had the same power for their gods, then likely any whale who hadn't put in the time wouldn't be able to hold their current position in the ranks. Among the top twenty ranked players at the moment, only four have skill as their dominant factor, while three players have time spent as the dominant factor and another three have exploits as the dominant factor. This means that the other half have secured their top twenty player rank position primarily through money spent, however all of the top twenty players have spent over one thousand dollars on the game (with perhaps a single exception).

In the next twenty players (ranked #21-40), money spent is less of a factor and there is more opportunity for exploits, time spent, and skill to dominate. In the past few months I have been secure in the top 50 player ranking and sat as high as twenty-sixth. On a few occasions I have been the highest ranked player for my level or any level lower. I spent just under 700USD on the game and I would say that most players in the top 100 ranking have spent more than me. However, many players in the top ranking have been playing since the game released for iOS which was almost a full year before me. While risking coming off as arrogant I would claim that my dominant factor is skill to explain my achievement in GoO, however I have spent a fair amount of money and I have put in a lot of time.

With respect to making the top player ranking through use of exploits, the player, “Crusher”, recently proved that exploits alone cannot afford a player a secure top 100 position. Crusher was in the top 100 half a year ago but has stopped spending money on the game. He never had much skill as a player and suffered some dismal losses against my base when he was many levels higher than me. His success was almost entirely a result of him corner tenting for himself using a mini account on a second device. Roughly one quarter of the top 100 player ranking is players who have achieved their rank primarily through the use of exploits. Here, I consider never solo attacking and always lining up assisters as being an exploit for higher order goal achievement in the game. I also consider players like Nikki who set up alliance rules that force allies to defend them religiously to also be exploiting when it comes to top player rank achievement. Finally, players who rely on corner tenting, scramble attacks, and bulky farming are also categorized as exploiters for achievement in the top 100 player ranking.

It might be fair to claim that the top 100 player ranking is a relatively even mix of the four factors with roughly one quarter of players being able to attribute their rank primarily to either money spent, time spent, use of exploits, or skill. Arguably, most players are relying on a unique mix of all four factors while a minority of players almost completely lack one factor. Star Lord is not top ranked because of time spent, Overkill is not top ranked because of money spent, I’m not top ranked because of use of exploits, and Rico is not top ranked because of skill. Two of the factors (time spent and skill) are equitable as variables for a player community and they do not preclude the game culture from developing a healthy competitive spirit, however the other two factors (money spent and use of exploits) lead to inequity in the gaming experience for the broader player community. Aegis Interactive cannot be blamed for fleecing whales given that Western governments have yet to properly address the capitalist exploitation rampant in the game industry – Aegis is just being competitive and trying to stay viable in a financial zoo without bars. On the other hand, Aegis can certainly be held accountable for their lack of due diligence in addressing exploits and removing them from the game. They have shown themselves to be aware of exploits and their response at the forums and in private correspondence has been to act ignorant either about how to fix the exploits or on understanding how they breed toxicity for the game culture and inequity for the player community.

CHAPTER 29

Veteran Skills

As previously mentioned one of the crises for the GoO game culture is that unskillful play can be rewarded equally to skillful play. Skilled players are unlikely to rely on scramble attacks or corner tenting, and instead hone an array of elite skills which lower level players will not be afforded either through not having all of the gods unlocked or because of a lack of inexperience generally.

Routing

When launching an attack, elite players will have a sense of an efficient route through the base. The route is typically based on temple spacing and accounting for any tricky areas such as “bridges” or “factories”. The best route will destroy the toughest and most well-defended temples prior to the end of Slow Time (the end of the burst). Often elite players will also include key monuments in their burst route. The slow push route which comes after the burst is often about cleaning up the edges of the base and doing a walk-around emphasizing crowd control techniques.

Elite GoO players will often request replays from other high level players for particular bases which they plan to revenge attack. The replay will reveal a successful route through the opponent’s base. Elite players will also ask their allies to eyeball the base they plan to attack and make a suggestion for routing. Routes are usually communicated between players through the colours of the temples. Worth noting is that “blue” can be short form for “Athena temple” but the same is rarely true for monuments.

Walking

When elite players start the slow push tactic during battle, the movement of their gods on the battlefield is referred to as “walking”. Players such as Raphman and AC Slater are considered great walkers, and when these players are on their game the gods almost glide through the base with defenses targeting in such a way that it seems controlled by the attacker. Walking is all about sweet spots, and great walkers will move their gods through the base targeting key defense structures, avoiding towers, and thinning swarms in a highly-coordinated and efficient manner. Walking describes the movement and pace in the slow push tactic. Great walking is usually a series of stutter-steps as the attacker alternates between targeting gods to defenses and allowing the gods to be AI-controlled.

Stacking

It is important to know the rules of the game in order to master gameplay. Stacking refers to the gods’ powers and which ones influence the others. Athena’s special power, Inspiration, stacks/buffs most of the other gods’ powers. Inspiration does not stack with Artemis Long Shot which is important to know if you are using the base pop attacking strategy. A failed Long Shot at the start of a base-pop battle is devastating and Artemis is lost from the battle for no good reason. Claqueous communicated with me at YouTube to let me know that Hera’s second power, Revenge, no longer created significant benefit when stacking with Hera’s Wrath and Athena’s Inspiration, but that Hera’s first power, Absorbing Strike, was now more powerful as a third power to stack. Carve/Big 4 attacks are reliant on Inspiration stacking with Ares’s powers.

Positioning

The gods are programmed to position themselves in a particular order. There is usually a front row, middle row, and back row for the gods. Tanks (high health) move to the front, and the gods with the lowest health usually naturally move to the back row. Updates can alter the position determined through code. At the moment, Aphrodite has had her health severely reduced from the last update but she still naturally moves to the front row because she has high strength. Hades is also very indignant and will shift to the front and especially the inside of the god pack for walk-arounds (which exposes him to the brunt of defensive forces).

Elite players must constantly re-position the gods during battles based on crowd control, thinning swarms, distracting defenses and swarms, protecting gods, and making sure tanks take the most damage dealt by defenses. When I battle, I will have to make dozens of little adjustments to make sure that Hera is in the front row (she is liable to stay in the middle), to make sure Aphrodite is protected in the middle, and to push out expendable gods strategically to slow and distract the swarm. Once defending assisters show up in battles, it might be necessary to move Apollo or Poseidon to the back row in order to neutralize defending assist drops.

Lower level players will often fail to reposition gods during the battle and it is heartache to watch the gods die needlessly. Lower level players will also usually fail to stack powers properly (which often seems like a waste), and they rarely walk with the slow push but instead target gods directly to temples positioned far away. Lower level players also usually have poorly-chosen routes through a base. My alliance, TRSS, was created to teach players these elite skills. Some other alliances also try to help teach players the game, but most don't waste their time. I don't recall Firesmoke officers ever explaining routing, stacking, walking, or positioning to new players. At best, most alliances will have officers mention in chat some tips after a less experienced ally's failed attack - the player should move slower, or go for Athena temple first, or remember to use Inspiration before Wrath, or push Hera to the front. The elite skill is alluded to through one of its instances, but the skill itself is seldom explained in logical terms.

Creative Substitution

The development of the base pop style was not intuitive and sacrificing Artemis at the start of battles is in effect creating a massive crutch for the attacker. The payoff is only possible when other gods have particular powers emphasized and when those powers are deployed in particular ways. Artemis is very valuable for her Spread Shot power as a means for crowd control and thinning swarms. Her Hawk Storm is usually critical for destroying the first defense swarm. In the base pop attack, Ares has to have his health and Whirlwind Attack power cranked up in level to replace the impact of Hawkstorm, meanwhile Zeus has to have his health and Chain Lightning power cranked up in level to replace the impact of Spread Shot as a method for effective crowd control. Many players don't feel that it is worth making these substitutions but players like Clausesous and me

have proven that they work, as we have both achieved the highest standing for our level in the past using the base pop style.

Base Design

There are several base features and unique designs developed through clever ingenuity of elite players. I dubbed the conglomeration of heavily house-supported, troop-spawning monuments, the “Factory”, and discovered that depending on where it was placed on the map, players would either ignore it (and pay dearly later) or would target it immediately thus wasting critical powers on defense structures that were not temples. Another defense trap is the “Bridge” which is a dense area of towers between two high-value temples, or between two major islands. The gods will have to pass through the bridge and will waste time slow-pushing the glom of towers, or get cut-up ignoring it. These defensive structures can be effective overt gimmicks at lower levels, but need subtle incorporation within higher level bases because experienced players will not be fooled by them.

Lower level players typically believe that the Zeus monument is the least powerful in the game, however if set up properly it is the most powerful. When activated by enemies within its range, the Zeus monument releases a chain of lightning that zaps through multiple attacking targets. When the Zeus monument is buffed with house support which increases its damage, then it can be placed within the range of an intentionally poorly-protected temple. Inexperienced assisters will attempt to take down the exposed temple without the help of gods and each assist drop will activate the monument. The monument completes its chain of lightning regardless of where targets are located on the map therefore the lightning may tear through back row gods and reduce their health dramatically. Experienced assisters will know not to activate monuments in this way.

One of the most elite attackers in the game, VIP, designed a very effective “stopper” for his base. He arranged his temples such that most players attacking his base would be likely to follow the route he laid out. This would inevitably draw them away from the Zeus temple (which grants an important general bonus to all defenses) until the very end of the battle. At the Zeus temple, VIP arranged two rows of ballista towers and his Hades monument, and all are buffed with powerful Zeus houses. As the lower health finesse team of slow push gods arrive at the temple, the ballistas will cut down the front row while the Hades monument almost always targets the back row of gods with its spawning skellies. I have seen many players fall into VIP’s trap. In addition, this design has proven effective against scramble attackers who will immediately lose their god that is dropped alone in front of the powerful ballistas. There are other kinds of “stoppers” which elite players have designed to create a powerful trap in their base.

Some base design features are more obvious, yet inexperienced players have yet to learn the value. Poseidon’s special power, Kraken, is able to pop up and destroy temples without the help of gods. Elite, skilled players discovered that two Poseidon houses

adjacent to a temple will produce a bubble shield powerful enough that it is immune to the Kraken or its tentacles. The bubble shields also absorb the brunt of Artemis's Long Shot and Aphrodite's Charm Building. A similar logic is used when protecting outlying temples with Cyclops towers, where because of the attack rate of the tower type it takes three Cyclops towers around a temple in order to neutralize the work that the attacker's assisters try to do in bringing down the temple. Two cyclops towers still allow enough free time for attacking assist drops to chip away at the temple. Some players also place their Hera temple in an unimportant location to the main route through the base and then buff all other temples with a few Hera houses. The attacker will either have to go out of their way to remove the Hera temple (and thus all Hera houses buffing the other temples) or will accept taking a little explosive damage to the gods on all other temples. Apollo houses also have scattered use in many elite player's bases. The temples which the player believes can withstand the death throes of the burst tank team attack will also have some Apollo houses adjacent in order to heal the temple back to full health. Outlying temples may also have Apollo house support in order to negate the impact of attacking assist units chipping away at the temple.

Decorations have great variety of type, shape, and size. They cost stone or gold to place on the base and there are some decorations that have a single unit (the ones that spawn resources) and other smaller decorations (like statues and arches) which can be purchased indefinitely if the player can afford it. The latter type of decoration is similar to towers or spawners and they become increasingly more expensive with each unit purchased. To the inexperienced player, decorations have only aesthetic value or function to reward a small amount of resources throughout the day. An inexperienced player may use decorations to fill an empty space in their base between temples, but the HP of decorations is extremely low and they are not a major obstacle. The only exception to this is the Amphitheatre which costs one million stone to place. Elite players have discovered that decorations can be arranged in clever ways to have powerful effects.

A patch of decorations can be placed in areas of the base where the player believes attackers will be walking through to get from one temple to another. The scattered decorations in the patch become a minefield where defense assist troops can be dropped which will then immediately be in contact with the gods and attacking them. The minefield also has the effect of throwing the gods out of their positioning. Back row gods with low health may move into the front row as the gods pass through the minefield of decorations. Out of order, once the weaker gods are targeted by defense towers and monuments they will have their precious health severely reduced or they may be destroyed. Additionally, many higher-level players with dense one-piece bases have used decorations to counter the base pop attack style. Artemis's Long Shot goes a distance of 3.5 spaces and placing decorations around the border of the base can insulate the central area from the full devastation of the pop explosion.

Finally, decorations are sometime just used for aesthetic reasons and I started a practice in GoO of placing the alliance name or initials on my base written out in decorations

(started at Firesmoke with “FS” on the base). Other players had been doing the same already for other player’s names who were their ally. Arguably, most people don’t find it intimidating to read a love note on an opponent’s base, but alliance designation can strike fear in the attacker when they realize that they might be up against a “stacked” squad who will be entering the fight to defend shortly. When I face New Era bases, I am not intimidated at all until I start seeing defenders enter the match to assist. The anxiety can potentially throw off the attacker and influence critical errors to occur. An alliance designation written on the base in decorations can signal this anxiety and potentially trigger it for some players.

Some of the high level skills mentioned so far are typically developed over time and it may require unlocking all the gods, their powers and having a dense, robust base for the high level skills to be available for practice. However, lower level players and smaller bases may have their own set of elite skills which make sense for that level of development in the game. Many lower level players have relied on Artemis’s Long Shot to take down temples quickly and from range. These players would put a large portion of their gold resources into having Long Shot at a much higher level than any other power so that a single use would destroy a temple on its own. When Hera was added to the game, low level players did the same thing with her Wrath power. A single “overpowered” god can help a new player level up quickly. With respect to base design, some lower level players will follow a similar logic and make a single defense structure overpowered. A single Archimedes tower which is at its maximum power for the player’s level can effectively thin attacking swarms or cut down gods and monsters quickly. A single powerful monument buffed with high level houses can have a similar effect. Also, a centrally-located temple which has much higher health and bonus than the other temples and which has good house support can stop gods dead in their tracks.

With the Poseidon update, Environments were added which provide bonus for one of the temples. I had great success with my “Rising Phoenix V.2” base where I placed the Apollo temple at the centre and maxed out its health and heal bonus. I surrounded the temple with powerful Apollo houses and then added the Apollo environment to the base. The healing ability of this temple was more powerful than the largest bases in the game. Many attackers hit a brick wall when they got to the Apollo temple and the Big 4 tank team simply could get through it before Slow Time ended and my defensive swarm was able to descend on the gods. I won several defenses and eventually had the highest defense trophies for any player my level or lower. This success caused several players to copy my base design and it was an uncanny experience to start my battle and realize I was facing my own base! Eventually, the elite attackers solved this base and knew to target the Apollo temple quickly (the same thing happened with the “factory” a year earlier). Today, players still rely on the environments to create an extra obstacle for the base and a possible god stopper. Sulkick effectively skunked me on his base a few times because of his use of the Hades environment and Hades houses. The powerful reanimating swarm could not be stopped through the crowd control powers of my gods.

Higher level, veteran skills will continue to evolve in Gods of Olympus provided that new content is added and balancing tweaks are made. It is the development of higher level skills which keep players interested in playing therefore a regular schedule of updates with brand new content and features is critical. Aegis Interactive has largely failed in this respect as the May update (2017) brought no new content and only balancing tweaks, the August update that year brought the event mode which used all pre-existing assets, and only one new god (Poseidon) has been added to the game since the start of 2017.

CHAPTER 30

Dark Play

There are two major perspectives on dark play in game studies: breaking the intended game rules affords adaptation for players or developers and is a productive practice, or breaking the intended game rules is exploitative against players and oppresses large sections of a game community. I lean toward the latter understanding because it has been my personal experience that cheating and exploits in games harms the cohesion of game communities while making individual players feel powerless and bullied. However, I recognize the aforementioned value of unintended transgressive play (or dark play) being part of competition and that finding viable work-arounds can make players who are subject to dark play feel more competent and successful as gamers.

Gods of Olympus, like many online multiplayer games, is riddled with dark play whether it is in the form of cheats, exploits, mods, or hacks. As a player who does not cheat, it is extremely difficult to probe the “dark” world of game cheaters. Game cheaters seek anonymity and almost always intend to mask their transgressions as being flaws in the game or rooted in quality of service issues for other players. When accusing a cheater of cheating in games, a common response would be, “you are just mad because you aren’t skilled in the game and I am”, or, “maybe you should reset your router because I wasn’t lagging at all”. GoO has an array of exploits readily available for all players to use while I conjecture that specific mods have been developed for the game. Outright cheating through hacks is well-known and monitored by the developers.

As previously mentioned, there are several hackers or players who rely on hacking in GoO and some have uploaded videos at YouTube to direct other players to the hacking software and provide instructions on how to use that software. Earlier in 2017, one morning my base was attacked by a player named “Francois”, however after his name in brackets was the message, “Contact Support”. Somehow our friend, Francois, had escaped his pen and was able to attack regular players in the game. I was a mere level 87 at the time and with maxed gods at his disposal, this hacker was still unable to beat my base – he simply didn’t have the game knowledge and skill. I revenge attacked him and made a tidy sum of loot on his base with its maxed temples and monuments. I emailed GoO support to report him and they informed me that they were aware he was out there but

that it shouldn't have been affecting player trophy count. It did affect my trophies but life goes on.

As it turns out the players who use the hacking tool are automatically taken out of the regular player population. If I keep my notifications for the game app turned on, then I will receive multiple notifications daily that my base is under attack by players who I have never heard of – these are the hack tool cheaters. At the time that Francois attacked my base he was listed as being in a regular alliance, and I could access his base while it seemed he was assisting his allies (almost 500 assists at the time). I'm not sure what the experience is like to use the hack tool but I do know that the attack by this hacker was something never repeated in my experience with the game. Perhaps, he had found a mod online to get him back into the regular player population, or alternatively it may have been a glitch for just that one battle against my base.

The world of game hacking and modding is fairly foreign to me. I know players who use both practices in games, but until you do it yourself you are a mere tourist likely describing only the monumental features. There is a surfeit of exploits in GoO which I am familiar with and have used. Most, if not all, exploits are a result of glitches and bugs in the game, and simply manifest as a result of sloppy coding by the programmers, and through tardiness and apathy by the developers in effecting a proper solution.

One of the GoO exploits is something which Volkan uses and is referred to as “Aphrodite Walking”. I have heard that Volkan was teaching players this exploit in New Era, and Juice claimed that he could also Aphrodite Walk however I have seen no players use the exploit apart from Volkan. It is possible that a mod is required to perform the exploit. The devs have been informed about Volkan’s “cheating” and have responded in writing that they attempted to patch the glitch previously but must have missed a subtle detail. They claimed that Volkan was using a “new” version of the exploit. This explanation suggests persuasively that Volkan is using a mod because if the developers patched a glitch, there shouldn't have been a similar breakdown after testing the effectiveness of the patch.

Conjecture aside, Volkan is the only player that I know who uses this exploit which involves Aphrodite being walked into the middle of a base while using her special power, Awe. For the duration of Awe, Aphrodite goes invisible to allies and defenses and the recharging of her powers has a much lower duration. When Aphrodite charms a building with her second power she is able to pass by the converted (and now friendly) defense structure but she will still have to stop in front of active enemy structures. Aphrodite Walking involves Aphrodite walking past enemy defenses as if they had been converted. Juice claims that the exploit simply involves button mashing when charming buildings, but I have attempted to produce the effect of the exploit and cannot. It may be that Aphrodite Walking is activated through a mod or perhaps it is simply the result of a sequence of button mashing actions, but either way it is an exploit in GoO which creates inequitable play. To be on the receiving end of this exploit can be frustrating because the opponent's victory is a virtual guarantee through the attacker being afforded an

opportunity to bushwhack a route through the base that would otherwise be unavailable. Imagine setting up in the starting blocks of a 100m dash and when the gun fires to signal the race a gold medal is immediately put around the neck of one of the runners. We can imagine this scenario in an Orwellian dictatorship when the oppressive State selects a Stakhanovite to propagandize for civic worship, but we must never forget that this logic is also prevailing in the experience of a multitude of online multiplayer games in the contemporary moment.

Volkan has been the pioneer of several exploits in Gods of Olympus. Aphrodite Walking remains a special practice, but Athena Trawling is used liberally by hundreds of players in the game. Athena is the most effective tank in the game and her health is the highest among gods while her Aegis Shield power dramatically reduces the damage she takes. Once cornertenting became a political topic in the player community through the official forums and in Line group chats, players like Volkан decided that they could use their gods as trawlers without the need for cornertent assisting. Once the burst is over, Athena will trawl the entire swarm to a corner of the map so that new gods can be dropped elsewhere without the threat of defending foot soldiers. Prior to a patch during the mid-year updates of 2017, Athena could continue to trawl the swarm even after new gods entered the map. After the patch, newly spawned troops will target whichever god is closest to them. Athena Trawling is still very effective, but the AI behaviour of defending swarms has been improved, and AI act more intuitively and intelligently although more work can be done in this area for greater improvement.

The cornertent operates similarly to Athena Trawling, except the cornertent is an assist unit dropped by allies of the attacker. Any assist unit on the map will attract all active defense structures provided that no other offensive unit is on the map at the time. If an attacker idles and waits to drop their gods, then an ally can drop an assist unit in the corner of the map (tents are most effective for their long duration in spawning foot soldiers) and the assist unit will draw all of the swarm to it. The cornertent is the equivalent to a chess player being allowed to turn their pawn into a queen at the moment where their actual queen is taken. Some players will claim that this isn't a problem and that we are now just playing "Chess 3.0" - opponents will have to adapt and find new strategies because the game has "evolved". However, my reply to this argument is that the chess pawn is part of a logically-based array of units which are organized around a specific war analogy. Historically, in the real world when there is regicide a common soldier in the army does not become the next regent. It has likely never happened in the history of humanity and it seems doubtful that if it had that this would be some "evolution" of monarchical structures. Napoleon Bonaparte simply crowned himself regent after deposing the old monarchy and the corruption and megalomania was as potent in the new regime as it had been previously.

Cornertenting also destroys the intuitive ideas about the theme of the game. A mass army is commissioned to protect their town and the precious temples built and dedicated to their gods and goddesses. This army is aware that a powerful strike force is potentially on

its way to attempt an invasion of their town. Scouts catch wind that a handful of enemy foot soldiers are massacring a few farmers at the very edge of the town's territory. The entire army of soldiers is mobilized to neutralize that handful of enemy foot soldiers and thus the entire town is temporarily left unprotected. Again, this has never happened in human history and no species protects their territory so carelessly and in such an idiotic manner. There is no logic to it and when a mass army performs a dumb task like this the town truly deserves to be ransacked. In GoO, a player never designs their base consistent with idiotic pretense about how to defend the primary assets, therefore a corner tent rendering the AI behaviour in defending to this level of idiocy makes absolutely no sense and it knocks a player out of their engagement with the game. This is what makes the corner tent a destructive exploit.

With Athena Trawling, one can imagine that an army of foot soldiers pursuing a powerful enemy force would remain in hot pursuit until that force was neutralized, but the corner tent is not a powerful enemy force and for a game like GoO to function properly the AI must adhere to a logical and sensible "aggro" system whereby enemies are targeted in a proportionate way based on the degree of threat they present. Aegis Interactive tweaked the game as a half-measure solution to the corner tenting and Athena Trawler exploits. As mentioned, newly spawned defense units will target whichever enemy is closest to them. The proper solution is to have corner tents targeted only by double the number of units which that corner tent unit produces. If skellies are dropped in the corner and are twelve skeleton soldiers in total then no more than twenty-four defending foot soldiers will target this corner drop and the rest of the swarm will ignore it. Quantity may not in fact be the best solution and instead the calculation might work best when based on health points. If the assist unit has a value of 500 for collective health points (for example all the foot soldiers that could potentially emerge from one tent have a cumulative 500 health points), then it will be met only with a force of defending units that have a collective health of one thousand points. Obviously, the developers could play around with the values, but at the moment the corner tent exploit is still alive and well in the game and chasing off thousands of new players, disengaging hundreds of veteran players, and making them either nerf their base or quit the game. It is worth noting that the tweak to the corner tent exploit was effective to a degree because New Era attack trophies went down considerably while players like Crusher who corner tent for themselves on a mini account can no longer make the top 100 player ranking.

There are some exploits which feel inequitable but are so awesome that it is difficult to argue against them and see them removed from the game. The base pop attack style has been accused of being an exploit based on the claim that it is "unfair" when an attacking player can access the middle of bases easily. Most of these types of complaints were voiced shortly after Hera was added to the game, and arguably many complainers were upset that they had to wait to unlock Hera and get a chance to use her Wrath. For other players, their Carve or Scramble attacks would eat up the entire play clock through plodding moments of idling or player inaction – the base pop attack was fast and some complainers were simply getting frustrated with how slow their own attacks were

compared to that of opponents and allies who were using Hera effectively. Over time, these players unlocked Hera and since then there have been few active complaints about her “overpowered” status in the game. I wouldn’t say that the base pop is an “exploit” because it doesn’t involve breaking the intuitive logic of the game. To use the base pop attack style is to also sacrifice one of the most powerful gods in the game. I believe that this trade-off effectively cancels any claims that the style represents exploitation.

An exploit can be defined as an action or action sequence that takes advantage of a feature of the game that was unintended by the developers and which was not accounted for by them when determining balance in competitive gameplay. By nature, exploits create imbalance in games and contribute to inequitable play. That exploits are available to all players is not enough of a reason to see their use as part of intended play if it also disrupts other aspects of the game. The cornertent exploits renders spawners obsolete which means that a player has invested a lot of loot gained over hundreds of hours of play completely pointlessly. If all players were guaranteed to use cornertents in every battle then no players would spend stone on buying spawners and this wouldn’t make the game a better, more enriched experience. In addition, the story of a town in ancient times being defended in war makes no sense without the idea of a foot soldier army protecting that town. The cornertent produces logical non sequiturs in the modes of meaning production for the game which inevitably disengages players from their immersion in the game experience. Casual players will often seek less immersion when gaming and this might be a contributing factor for the rampant use of cornertents in GoO.

A final exploit worth mentioning is Super Reanimate. If a base has a high bonus level for its Hades temple, then defending foot soldiers that are destroyed during battle may reanimate into defending skellies. The higher the Hades temple bonus means a higher chance for reanimation. The god Hades is able to use his first power Reanimate to disintegrate defending skellies and summon fresh ones from fallen friendly and enemy foot soldiers. Reanimate is a power with an effective range, so if there is a large mass of destroyed foot soldiers in a small area around Hades, then there is a chance for Super Reanimate. The best way to create this small, dense area of fallen foot soldiers is to use Hawk Storm or Wrath on a mighty swarm. In Big 4 attacks, Athena will trawl the swarm to the next most well defended temple on the map. This is where Hera will drop and activate Wrath. The swarm is destroyed and if the player times it correctly there is a moment as the enemy skellies rise from the ground that Hades can reanimate them into friendly units. When done correctly, the super reanimate produces such a massive army of skellies that it is difficult to wipe them all out before the end of the battle. The attacking gods will work through the rest of the map relatively unscathed.

Super Reanimate doesn’t make a lot of sense because Hades’s power isn’t supposed to convert so many units, but that is because his power is connected to an area of effect. When Hera’s Wrath wipes out an entire swarm in a pinpoint location, Hades’s reanimate becomes overpowered. Reasonably speaking, the developers should alter the programming on Hades reanimate to be based on units reanimated instead of area

reanimated within. Some players have only one solution for the devastation of Super Reanimate which is to nerf their Hades temple and give it no reanimation bonus. Again, this is clearly not a reasonable solution and it renders an intended aspect of gameplay obsolete. So, nerf the Hades temple bonus to counter ten percent of attackers or keep it for the rest of players, and if kept then realize that the ten percent of players who use Super Reanimate will have a near-guaranteed victory. In addition, Super Reanimate is not truly available to all players because the exact moment for activating the exploit is often missed because of latency and lag for players that are affected adversely by quality of service issues arising in a game experience that doesn't provide the support of dedicated servers. Players with older devices will likely experience a lag hiccup in the frenetic moment where reanimate should be activated to create the Super Reanimate effect (there is lag because the game has started to render a large mass of what would be enemy skellies).

With the addition of the new event mode in the summer of 2017, players were granted the opportunity to use gods and powers they had yet to unlock in regular play. All players had the same gods and powers for the same levels in the challenge. There was a notion that players who don't spend money on the game but who are skilled would now have a chance to shine. This didn't materialize because it would seem that many players found a speed hacking method for the events. I have yet to discover a mod or apk that is affording the players an opportunity to speed hack and perhaps there is no cheating going on whatsoever. I am assuming that there is a speed hacking program being used for the events because many of the players who take the top spots on the leaderboard in every event have proven themselves to be highly unskilled in regular attacking in the game.

Players such as "Flavio" have a very difficult time beating my base on a variety of designs and when I watch replays, it is clear that players such as this are unskilled at maneuvering five gods in a coordinated way on the battlefield all at once. These players almost always use the Scramble attack style. If they used more skilled attack styles then they would have beaten my base all those times. However, the events (Golden God) absolutely require that a player be highly skilled in maneuvering as well as coordinated in managing a full team of gods. As mentioned, scramble attacks have an upper limit for success and none of the highest ranked players use the scramble attack (Geo has yet to crack the top 10 and likely never will). I cannot fathom how a player who is capable of using the slow push and doing the Carve style would then degrade themselves in the player community by using scramble style. It is possible that because events allow a player an indefinite number of attempts for each level that these low-skill scramble attackers are finding a way to solve the base, but this is incredibly improbable, not to mention that players like Flavio get to the highest levels of the events almost immediately after they become available to players. In my mind, speed hacking is the only explanation, but perhaps there is some other form of dark play. What is certain is that the events were hijacked by cheaters from the beginning and the developers have yet to properly address this. Again, this has alienated high level veteran players who then retire from the game.

Dark play lives up to its name and it is not a simple task to identify cheaters and once you have a suspect it is near impossible to prove that they are cheating. Hacking in GoO is more obvious as a form of cheating and the developers have decided to keep it in check. Exploits are also self-effacing although the GoO player community is extremely divided on their use and whether they should be limited or removed from the game altogether. As a player who prides himself on skill above all else in competitive gaming (ie. games with ranking), I would like to see at least one alliance geared for not allowing their players to use unskilled exploitative forms of play. I had hoped that Legends would be this alliance and the buzz for the core crew had been consistent with the value of having a team of highly-skilled attackers, however in the pursuit of top rank, the alliance lost its way and added players who lacked significant skill and who believed in the ideology of “win-at-all-costs” for games.

Dominant Sugar and I have started a new alliance which I named “Polymaths” and will likely remain a quiet, sparsely populated place in the player community. The mandate is to find intelligent, skilled, conscientious players and then train them in the higher level skills of the game. It remains to be seen whether this will become a fruitful venture, but my hopes are high because I have met several impressive people while gaming online.

CHAPTER 31

Necessary Fixes

Based on the CWA Gaming interview with Aegis Interactive developer, Jay, it would seem that the intention of the GoO creators was to make the game a viable alternative to Clash of Clans. Perhaps, there was never an impetus to supplant CoC as the build-and-battle strategy game industry leader, but surely Aegis had hoped to foster broader popularity globally, and especially in North America. GoO has had many problems but some are fixable and have workable solutions which could have been implemented already and can still be implemented before it's too late.

Currently, battles are player-hosted matches and with an international community of players not only attacking but also joining battles as assisters there can be tremendous lag. A third of all battles which I try to join as an assister will simply freeze me in the loading screen for minutes on end (this is referred to as being “stuck in clouds” because the loading screen is an animated section of cloud cover above bases). Another third of battles will be ones which I can join but where I am unable to drop assist troops. I will be credited with nectar for dropping the units and I will appear in the battle log as an assister however my units never actually materialize on the battlefield after I select a placement location. Many players complain about alliances which always have a lot of players assisting, but one must remember that ten assisters in the battle log could actually mean two assisters worth of units being contributed to the battle.

Additionally, the lack of dedicated servers opens up Gods of Olympus to quality of service dark play (“QoS Dark Play”) whereby lag-switches and software such as XG Firewalls and IP flooders can be used to bump players out of battles or severely lag them. It is a commonly-held belief among elite players in Gods of Olympus that “Raphy” uses QoS Dark Play to succeed in the game. During my last week at Sloppy Seconds, several Italian players joined the alliance and I immediately found there to be a direct correlation between their presence in my battles as assisters and powerful lag spikes that made it difficult for me to move my gods properly on the battlefield. I have experienced all of these issues already from my extensive and intense gaming experiences with Gears of War 2 (Epic Games, 2008) which was also a game that didn’t provide the support of dedicated servers. In effect, these Italians by being a group of players in a similar region and likely connected with the same DNS addresses, were bridging my host and forcing their signal to be deemed the dominant one in the network (likely the actual players did not intend this effect).

In this day-and-age, no online multiplayer video game should lack the support of dedicated servers and I can only explain the choice to have player-hosted battles in three ways: the developers are privileging fiscal restraint, the developers wanted all players in the same pool regardless of lag, or the developers hope to see their game evolve new forms of unpredictable and unintended gameplay. I would assume the first explanation for Aegis Interactive, but you never know as they are a very hermetically-sealed development team and it is possible that they reasoned the trade-off of putting all the players together as worth making the quality of experience low with respect to latency. The game is also not optimized adequately and players can intentionally generate significant lag for their opponents through designing their base particular ways. “Saint-Rapha” uses the entire space of the map to build an elegant, but not well-protected base. However, his excessive use of decorations creates debilitating lag for some players because the game engine chugs when rendering all of the decorations.

The trophy system has been hijacked by bulky farmers and as more players become disgruntled with the slow development of the game, they join the ranks of farmers who seldom show respect to their opponents who are still actively competing to achieve in the higher order goals of the game. Arya has been farming for over a year and will often attack the same player dozens of times each day precluding any sense of progress for his hapless victims. He will maintain his attack trophy range through dropping trophies to players he likes. The current matchmaking system is intuitive and reasonable (attacker attack trophies matched against defender defense trophies), but the trophy system is broken. In the past month, Raphman (who is one of only a handful of players with maxed gods) has begun bulky farming in a flagrantly disrespectful manner. He not only attacks the same player dozens of times every day but also attacks on hard difficulty which means he reaps a large number of trophies with each victory.

Bulky farmers are clearly not interested in trophies whereas their energetic and enthusiastic downtrodden opponents likely still are. The solution is clear as day – the

trophy system must be based on the level of players matched against each other. If Raphman is level 130 and the base he attacks is of a player who is level 110, then he can only reap a single trophy from the victory and he risks maximum losses if he surrenders or loses the match. This would mean that bulky farmers commit to farming or they must be careful about how far they drop because it could be an arduous task to rebuild trophies to a competitive position. Unskilled whales who haven't put much time in the game may complain that their rise to top ranked position would be held up, but frankly they need to "pay" their dues to the player community given that they are more-or-less stealing a space in the ranking, and they should be encouraged to get some practice in and try to earn their position in the player ranks as much as possible.

Player ranking can be made more competitive through fixing the trophy system which will keep whales and bulky farmers better in check, but alliance ranking is also broken at present. Currently, alliance rank factors in the trophies of players who are inactive, including those who have either always been inactive or who have been inactive for months. It is nice to believe that an alliance is a "family" and one can respect that they don't want to remove players who they consider kin however these inactive players should not be able to contribute their trophies to the alliance ranking if they have been inactive for a long time. I'm sure that Wayne Gretzky is considered "family" within the Edmonton Oilers ice hockey organization however the team's scoresheet this season will not include his record-breaking 92 goals from the 1981-82 season, nor would the wins of the Chicago Bulls in the 1990s be included for this year's Bulls team in the NBA. Such inclusions would render competition to a farce and the Bulls each year would be deemed the "best" and each season the Oilers would be said to have the most goals.

Inactive players should certainly have their trophies excluded from alliance rank once they have been inactive for at least thirty days however there is a thought that the game's system should go one step further and be geared to automatically remove long-time inactive players. My experience in traveling around the GoO game community has been that inactive players have a necrotising effect on alliance community dynamics. Being in a depopulated alliance because of inactive players usually means that there is little activity and this encourages players to simply log in to burn nectar. Community cohesion is not fostered and sooner than later all players have gone inactive. The top 100 alliance ranking currently has ten percent of its alliances with more than two-thirds of their players as inactive for longer than a week. I conducted a survey in November, 2017 on the inactivity of the top 100 ranked alliances, and I had conducted a similar survey about six months earlier. The results were very similar between the two surveys – 30% of players in the top 100 alliances had been inactive for a week or longer, and it is common that after a week of inactivity in GoO players do not return to the game. In the November survey, roughly 2500 players were inactive leaving the top alliances with less than 6000 active players.

I would suggest that Aegis Interactive automatically remove long-time inactive players from top 100 alliances. This would free up spots in these alliances which would encourage the players there to either move to a new alliance and fill it up or allow new players to

join the alliance and have it become more of an active community. The “Walking Dead” system currently in place renders most alliances to ghost towns with a few rogue survivalists doing a routine run for resources. In addition, forcing the removal of long-time inactive players would solve the problem of inequity in the alliance ranking – alliance rank would be based only on the strength of its active players. We cringe at the notion (or conspiracy theory) that political parties grant voting cards and record “votes” to the deceased and this smacks of being the height of political corruption, so why not hold games and all other media to a similar standard of honesty and equity?

Attempting to maintain a high alliance rank through keeping inactive players on the roster is one way that alliances will necrotise culturally. Also, GoO is not programmed with a system for saving player data related to a history of assisting. When a player leaves an alliance they will automatically lose their assist tally and their officer rank. Any alliance which they join afterward will set their assists to zero and start them as a citizen. The lack of tracking in this regard has been debilitating to the player community where many players are afraid to leave their alliance to explore because they lose their status in the alliance as a prolific assister. Some players will even fear that they would have to work extra hard to get their officer commission back. These fears are not misplaced and I have experienced firsthand the effects of walking away from an alliance only to return a few weeks, or a few months later – you are placed near the bottom of the pecking order and many allies have their nose out of joint about you deserting them. GoO players are often quick to take offense, while sweaty, nesting, and snowflake alliance ideology can dictate that returning players will be deemed anathema or even possible traitors or spies. There isn’t much that can be done for individuals who put emotion before reason however in the least Aegis could have player assist numbers remembered and then reinstated if and when players return to an alliance. In this way, there would be greater communication, learning, and understanding between players as they move around from alliance to alliance and get to know each other. In addition, high level players who established strong alliances would be able to leave to recruit and start a process of consolidating active players into only the energetic, active alliances.

I have a long list of problems with Gods of Olympus, but perhaps the most important of all is that the tutorial levels in the game are inadequate. As a result of uninspiring and barely informative tutorials, many younger players do not learn the basics quickly enough and therefore they uninstall the game within the first few days or weeks of playing. Currently, the game introduces Zeus and his most basic powered attack of Chain Lightning. The new player is instructed to attack a base which has a single defense structure to be targeted. The next tasks are also incredibly simple and introduce only the most basic elements of the user interface. A new player is directed toward setting up their first temple and some towers and then instructed to unlock a second god, but there is no advice made about how to decide about which god to choose. It would be very helpful if the new player was placed as a bonus assister in a random battle of higher level players. The new player could see how the gods operate and be inspired from the get go. In addition, the new player is not instructed in the most valuable tool of the game – the

move-all button. When the game released there was no move-all option which might explain why the tutorials ignore it however Aegis needed to add some lessons for new players so that they could become competent with the multitasking aspect of full-combat control.

There are video games where the tutorial level grants the player the full range of powers which will be available near the end of the game (for example, Darksiders). Even though the new player will be stripped of these powers after the tutorial they have whet the appetite for more intense and rewarding action. Gods of Olympus would benefit from introducing new players to the game through having them experience the most intense action the game has to offer right away. Additionally, another tutorial level could walk a player through the basics of good base design through demonstrating the varied effectiveness of different tower types or foot soldier units. The player should also begin the game with a free choice for their first monument and it should be made clear and easy to understand how each monument functions. Gods of Olympus is considerably more difficult to master than Clash of Clans and when new players arrive at GoO from CoC they likely experience a bit of culture shock. Extensive tutorials would certainly help with making the transition smoother.

Since the Poseidon update in October, 2017, there has been an imbalance in attack prowess versus defense stability. All players have found an easier time with attacking given that Poseidon is both a tank with high health points and a ranged attacker with a powerful pulse blast power. Poseidon's special power, Kraken, is often able to wipe out temples or otherwise an array of critical defense towers and support houses. Most players have been reeling from the fact that defense trophies have plummeted and new base designs have taken time to build only to then be found ineffective. The environment bonus which can be activated to boost defense have made only small dents in the overwhelming force which players wield as attackers now. Some players have suggested that the solution to these problems of overall imbalance should involve creating land expansion for the map so that the base can be more sprawled out. Other players have suggested that spawners have an increased health and troop bonus, or that monuments should have increased effective range, or that houses should not be destroyed when their patron temple is destroyed. All of these suggestions are suitable and can be implemented fairly easily to indeed restore balance to the game and make defending bases worthwhile once more. At present, most high level players confess that they no longer waste time designing bases or defending bases.

There is perhaps a more suitable solution to the problem of imbalance between attack and defense than simply re-tweaking pre-existing defensive assets in the base. Attacking with all nine gods has made the offensive force overpowered. The amount of stone available to players cannot keep up with the firepower of the gods and bases are never robust enough to counter the onslaught of upgraded god special powers. A simple solution which has added bonuses for gameplay would be to force the player to shelf two gods for every battle. The player may choose the lineup of gods for individual battles but

two will sit out. This would have multiple immediate positive effects for the game where high level players would feel challenged again and have to work up to get back to the bases which they formerly breezed through, defense trophies for all players would increase dramatically, and the highest level players would find challenges once more. The developers had received a fair number of complaints from the highest level players about how the gaming experience was tedious because they were a small group of players who always had to face each other. When this group all joined the same alliance, their opponents were in the next tier of players below and this provided no challenge. To answer these issues, the developers created “god bases” which were a series of bases focused on individual gods with respect to temple placement and house support. These bases have proven challenging for most players, but they are also filled with decorations which grant no stone reward (unlike in regular player bases) and which generate tremendous lag when rendered during battles. This makeshift fix with god bases has been subpar and shelving gods would have provided a more comprehensive and lasting solution. The other great advantage of having players select a custom team for each battle is that it makes GoO attack gameplay similar to CoC army-cooking, and a new array of attack styles would emerge and be honed by experimental and skilled players.

There are potential fixes for the game which would improve particular attack styles or make their use more equitable within the broader player community. As mentioned, GoO has had a difficult time attracting and keeping hardcore gamers because the unskilled and uncompetitive attack styles can be as successful and reap as much in-game resources as skilled, finely-tuned attack styles. Currently, the scramble attack style works about as well as the base pop or big 4 attacks. This shouldn’t be the case and when I attempted the scramble attack for the first time on a high level base I was successful without any problems whatsoever. On the other hand, when I began developing the carve style it took hundreds of attempts to make it efficient and smooth. Scramble attackers are simply unskilled and therefore should not allow players the opportunity to have as much success as skilled players at the same level. One quick solution to bring back balance to the major attack styles would be to program the AI-controlled monsters (Cerberus and Kraken) to read temples as friendly structures. The monsters would ignore the temples and Hades would no longer be trusted to take down a temple on his own. Scramble attackers would have to go down a tier from where they currently are.

There are small fixes which would enhance some of the skill-based attack styles. In the base pop attack, Artemis is sacrificed at the beginning and the creative substitution is to have a more reliable and powerful Zeus to take up her role for crowd control. At present, Zeus’s Chain Lightning power will target all defensive structures. For more efficient crowd control, Chain Lightning should only target defending foot soldiers. A chain lightning used on a patch of decorations is a terrible waste and the power often has no impact on towers or monuments with high health points. For the carve/big 4 attacks, Aphrodite is a critical crowd control component of the slow push tactic. Currently, when Aphrodite is using her special power, Awe, she is invisible to enemy units, but she is also invisible to allies. Assistants cannot heal her when she is in Awe and it would be more intuitive if they

could. These are small changes being suggested and do not constitute an exhaustive list by any means. It is possible that there would be as many players praising little fixes such as these as there would be players complaining about them.

In February, 2018, I created a focus group at Line app named “Odds of Olympus”. I invited over three hundred players and currently we have ninety members. This is roughly the size of most Global GoO groups at Line. There are no developers in the group and some players have left because they feel suggesting solutions outside of the official forums is pointless. Other players have found that their requests at the forums are completely ignored by the moderators and dev team therefore a player-led group for suggesting game improvements is a refreshing change. So far, a first list of player requests was compiled and I also posted two original ideas for possible alliance wars formats. Many players made the same request and the most popular requests have been: base editor, alliance wars, more effective defense. There have also been disagreements, for example, where some players strongly feel that the game does not provide enough free attacks daily while other players recognize GoO as the most generous game of its kind in this respect. You can't make everyone happy all of the time, but the focus group has revealed some trends and common concerns of the elite player community.

Most of the suggestions made in the focus group relate to additional features and new content for the game, but other feedback offered outlined solutions to current problems. “Shanchal” (from Butterballs) suggested that alliances not have one hundred members but be more concentrated with fifty members. The contracted alliances would mean a more competitive pool of active alliances. In addition, it would be easier to organize fewer players and in my case I might finally find an alliance of strictly skilled, hardcore gamers. “Yunus” (from Heathens) was looking to see a rebalance in god powers and suggested that Poseidon needed to be nerfed while some of the seemingly neglected original six gods such as Apollo needed to be made more powerful. Some players like “Superior” (retired) remarked that they wanted some of the changes already made to the game now reversed, such as when the developers nerfed the power of Hera's assist unit (explosive Vengeance Warriors). With Poseidon overpowered, the old VWs would have been a powerful neutralizing force which could re-calibrate the offense-defense imbalance.

The suggestions coming from the focus group at Line is an ongoing development, but most players mistake me as someone who has the developers' ear. Unfortunately, my in-game persona is something which the developers cannot separate from my role as a scholar of the game. I have written to them a few messages to explain my reasons for developing an agent provocateur virtual persona and I have introduced them to the real man, but I suppose it is easier to conflate personalities. The paparazzi photojournalists have made a career on everyday people's inability to separate the myth from the man, so to speak. It is my belief that fixes will continue to be a slog in the development process and I have a sense that the intention of GoO's owners was always to sell the game to a gaming conglomerate such as Tencent.

Brian from Firesmoke requested in the Odds of Olympus chat group that the developers spend more money on PR and marketing initiatives. It is confounding how the game has little development in this regard. In a private correspondence with the dev team, I was informed that Aegis Interactive was not planning on sending any of their team to the 2018 Game Developers Conference (GDC). For me this spells doom to a game which has made great strides, but going into its third year of being online should be trying to forge a path at the world's largest and most important conference for game development. I can only reason that the Aegis team is laying-low and has been pursuing a sale of the game for a long time. This would possibly explain why there have been no influential marketing initiatives for the game – this would establish a “brand” for the game. An established brand might make it more difficult for the new owners to re-brand the game so that it fits better into their own operating models, revenue models, and oeuvre of games.

CHAPTER 32

Possible Additions

A regular stream of new content and features is the hallmark of greatness for contemporary multiplayer-based video games. Aegis Interactive has had a difficult time rolling out updates for Gods of Olympus and in 2017 there was only two occasions where new functionality was added to the game (adding event mode, and then Poseidon/environments). The player community has been requesting certain key features from the start (alliance wars and a base editor) and this was likely the player-set agenda because of previous experiences playing Clash of Clans and related games in the build-and-battle strategy genre. As mentioned, a majority of comments at YouTube for GoO videos has been requests for new gods added to the game. Games such as Clash of Clans, Overwatch, and League of Legends are very popular largely because they provide players with a wide array of choice in which characters to select when playing. Game developers have recognized the need to make significant additions to playable character rosters ever since Super Mario Bros. 2 (1988) added Toad and Princess Peach as playable characters, or when Streetfighter II released its Champion edition in 1992 with the four Grand Master bosses as playable characters.

Ideally, GoO would have at least twenty gods to choose from, and only five to seven would be taken into any given battle. This would mean that the very top bases would be unbeatable, but perhaps players at the highest levels could pay to unlock an eighth spot for an additional god during battles. Players could pay increasingly more to unlock gods for their general roster, perhaps up to the eighth or tenth god until the rest would cost the same amount of gold to unlock. Possible new characters could include mythological monsters and heroes who are not deities per se (Hercules, Medusa, Argus, and Perseus). The player community made it clear that they wanted new characters, but the roll-out was so slow that many players have given up and left the game. There was a lot of hype for Poseidon on social media in 2016 but he had a lackluster release at the end of 2017.

Gods of Olympus is a difficult game to master but it is still very challenging just to be competent in attacks and base design. Failing in front of many players can be an embarrassing and discouraging experience. In most multiplayer games, all of the players have the same status on the battlefield whereas in GoO the attacker has got the spotlight and dozens of players who enter the battle as assisters may be witness to a humiliation of sorts if the attacker fails. I believe that this effect is one of the primary reasons that young players do not stick with GoO. There are two obvious solutions for this social problem of spectacular failure: solo mode and increased randomizers.

Solo mode would be identical to the current matchmaking battle mode except it would mean that no assisters are present for either side, defense replays are unavailable, and players have a separate ranking exclusively for trophies gained through solo mode. Solo mode attacks would not show in the alliance active battle log and allies would not know if other players in the alliance were attacking on solo mode. Elite, veteran players could start working their way up in the ranks of solo mode while still contributing to alliances and helping with alliance rank through their personal trophies in the social matchmaking. Other players could join the game and enjoy a more personal way of playing while some new players could use solo mode as a proving ground until they feel comfortable sharing their attacks with allies. The pressure of failure in front of others hasn't only caused a lot of players to uninstall GoO, but it has also contributed to the anti-social ideologies which pervade most alliances. Assisting is emphasized in many alliances through draconian rules in order to decrease the risk of players failing in front of witnesses. The same can be said for why corner tenting and other exploits proliferate in the game. Additionally, there are players who barely ever attack because of the embarrassment of being unsuccessful, and instead they rack up an incredible number of assists. These players, like Opie, who understand little about the competitiveness of the game from higher-order goals, will then be bestowed with authority through their assisting. This has been known to chase off strong attackers and overall make those alliances weaker and less diverse in their player composition.

The other feature which can help make players less self-conscious about their failure in a social context is the addition of randomizers. Currently, a powerful randomizer in GoO is the ability to assist in battles however this doesn't address the issue of social embarrassment and is in fact its primary cause. Another unintended randomizer is lag, but again this is undesirable to most players. However, AI-controlled monsters such as Cerberus and Kraken are randomizers which benefit the player and allow them to disavow their failure as being the result of random events. To disavow a failure because a player was swarmed by a dozen defending assisters doesn't bring much mental relief from social embarrassment, and it simply means that there was a crowd to witness a fall regardless of what caused the fall in the first place. To some self-absorbed, over-sensitive players (snowflake alliance ideology) the assisters are in fact a gang of bullies which only heightens the embarrassment and occasionally leads to insidious ploys to recruit a buffer of allied assisters. Lag is a randomizer which can be blamed and scapegoated for personal

failure, but again the player who makes excuses is still left feeling inadequate for being a victim of lag when many other players are not. Blaming lag is a common scapegoat for gamer failure, so it is difficult to disavow embarrassment through blaming lag without also feeling guilty in exchange.

These negative emotions can add up and become compounded, then driving players away from games. On the other hand, Cerberus and Kraken can be blamed as having not done a great job in the battle and that this was unlucky. That Cerberus went for a monument instead of a temple or that Kraken didn't destroy any temples is chalked up to probability, and the randomness this time was unfortunately unlucky for the attacking player. It isn't that the AI-controlled monsters are "stupid", but they simply didn't have great spawn points or routes through the map in a particular battle. This is bound to happen and the player shouldn't blame themselves fully for a failed attack. The player can disavow their failure through pointing to the unluckiness of the AI-based randomization in a particular battle. I would suggest that to foster a broad community of young players will require more randomizers such as the AI-controlled monsters. In Clash of Clans, all of the attack units are AI-controlled and I believe that the popularity of CoC is based around the logic of players being able to disavow their own mistakes as being unluckiness in how the AI-controlled characters operated – it isn't that I dropped my dragons in an obviously risky location, but that the dragons have a mind of their own and went the wrong way.

The base editor is a critical part of build-and-battle games. GoO has been without a base editor since its release and it makes building bases a labour-intensive duty. As a competitive GoO player, I will want to change my base at the point where most of my opponents are beating it. I have had a rule that if three players attacking on normal beat my base consecutively then it is time to redesign and rebuild. I am more patient when losing to attackers battling on easy difficulty because I too expect to win at least nine out of ten easy battles. As a higher level player, my defensive assets take up most of the map which means that I have to shuffle assets around individually when redesigning my base. This is an inefficient and annoying process which can sometimes takes hours to complete. There is an option to spend gems and remove all of the assets except temples, monuments and altar decorations however this can get expensive if a player wants to experiment with designs. I have completely cleared my base on half a dozen occasions but most of the time I simply shuffling assets around and try to make room for building the new base section by section. I can imagine that with the way GoO works, it might require a separate engine to create a base editor. In CoC, the player does not sell back defensive assets and when using the base editor, a fresh map is created and the player has an inventory of their assets which can then be placed wherever. A base editor should help to bring back retired high level players to the game and make veteran players who were going inactive more enthusiastic about finding base designs quickly which can hold up to the overpowered gods.

In 2017, after my personal disappointment with the May update, I designed an alliance wars format which was then used with Heathens and First World Problems participating.

The alliance war was a huge success, but it had many flaws. Heathens and FWP were used because their players matched up very well and even still I had to carefully select only ten players from each alliance to ensure that the teams were balanced. Several players complained that they weren't allowed in the war or that the assisting on battles had a cap of seven assisters. In the end, I had to do a lot of work creating spreadsheets and calculations to even out the teams, and then keep a scoresheet for the results of battles. I also had to be a referee in all battles to verify that the rules of the alliance war were being upheld. Although it was a lot of work on my part, and the players had to be patient, I did come to believe that there were viable options for introducing alliance wars to Gods of Olympus.

I do not believe that a standard PvP format will work for alliance wars in GoO because very few alliances match up and most wars would involve bullying or would see the same two alliances always facing each other. In our focus group, players have been resisting this reality and attempting to concoct wild ways to balance alliances that are inherently not good matchups. One suggestion has been to nerf the power of a stronger player's gods but it is obvious that players will feel cheated when they lose under these conditions. For me, PvE is the only viable possibility because the player pool is simply too small. Even in Clash of Clans when Clan Wars had just released and there were tens of millions of active players, my clan still had a difficult time finding opponents for a 20v20 player war. The matchmaking process could take several hours and the leader would occasionally stop matchmaking to take out some players and put others in. With less than ten thousand active players scattered into hundreds of alliances, PvP alliance wars is more-or-less impossible. PvE on the other hand presents several options for GoO alliance wars.

One format I have suggested is where the dev team goes through the game and picks out one hundred impressive player bases for a variety of levels of player. The team would check not to have bases that are too similar and they would then copy those bases and set them up for the alliance war. The hundred bases could have different environments applied to make them function uniquely. These base copies could also be left anonymous or the player who built it could get credit somewhere during the war. Players would then be granted an array of gods with particular powers set at particular levels (including god health and strength) which would be similar to the Golden God events. All players would use the same lineup of gods for Base #1 and the same lineup for Base #100, and everything in between. All alliances could participate in the alliance war and there would be a top ranking list with gem prizes. Each base being beat would grant loot rewards to all alliance members which would appear in the messages tab, similar to how "gifts" currently work as a loot kick-back when allies buy gem packs through the in-game store.

Alliances would start with the first bases in the hundred base set, and any player could attack the base to beat it. If a player is engaged with the base, it is temporarily closed off to other allies. Regardless of whether the attacking player succeeds or fails on the base they then have a cool down period where they have to wait to do another alliance war base attack. The cool down would ensure that the same player doesn't get to play through

all the bases without other players in the alliance getting an opportunity to attack. The bases would become increasingly more difficult and the lineup of gods might require a more skilled and experienced attacker to achieve victory. The final bases would be where the game's most skilled players would shine provided that they were part of alliances with enough other competent players that could get the alliance to the higher level bases in the war (cooldown periods would limit alliances with only a handful of skilled attackers). There could be a cap on number of assisters and "Morpheus" from the focus group at Line stated that no alliance war would be fair if there weren't dedicated servers. This is one possibility for an alliance war format which borrows from the current event mode structure. I believe that this war format would be equitable and that players would be invested because each base would reap valuable loot, ranking in the war would reap coveted gems, and all of the alliances would be able to participate and have a chance at taking top spot (similar to how the new events allow all players the opportunity to win the event regardless of player level).

There are other possibilities for alliance wars and players have come to me with their own ideas or ones borrowed from other games that they have played. It remains to be seen whether Aegis is interested in developing an alliance wars format for GoO but it may be the only feature that can restore the confidence of veteran players while bringing in droves of excited, new players. Doing alliance wars the wrong way will likely tank the game for good.

I have also considered the possibility of developing an ongoing event mode that would be alliance-based. Currently, events happened weekly or bi-weekly and have duration of three days. Events are all individual-based and the prestige of high-achievement is not shared with allies. When the dev team introduced the god bases as an added challenge for the highest level players, it got me to thinking about an alliance-based event. More god bases could be built by the dev team which either focus on one god, or perhaps a duo or trio of gods. Then there could be battles between AI-controlled forces – on one side would be a god (or duo/trio of gods) attacking and then there would be the god base defending. The gods would unleash their powers, summon swarms, and would be accompanied by attacking units. Alliance battle logs would on occasion show these AI god battles and two alliances could come in as assisters to assist on either side. For example, the god battle might launch and it is the Zeus-Hera team vs. the Artemis-Apollo base. Heathens would be invited through their battle log to join in support of the attackers while FWP would be invited to support the base with assist units. It might be the case that no players are online at the time, or one side may show up with overwhelming force and thus determine the outcome of the battle. There would be loot available to all players who assisted in the god battle and there could be a ranking in the game to show which alliance had accumulated the most victories and/or loot. This information would also allow all players to know roughly which alliances are the most active which in turn could cause players to move around to be with more active player communities.

Other players in the focus group suggested some of their ideas for new events. “Suitmaker” wanted to see a base design challenge added where all players would be given the assets which match up roughly with a strong high level base. Each player would design individual bases which would then be attacked by AI-controlled armies (similar to Invasion challenges in the event mode). Players would be ranked based on how long they could fend off the AI-controlled swarms. I think that this suggestion is very good and would go a long way to substituting for a lack of tutorials however an event such as the one Suitmaker describes would also require a base editor.

Players in the focus group made several suggestions for little additional features and content that could be added to Gods of Olympus. “Nikki” (from British Gods) wanted to be able to see a player’s status in their alliance during battles, such as whether they are an alliance leader, and she also wanted an invite option where at the battle log, the opponent could be sent an invite to join the alliance. Nikki felt that these additions would make for greater awareness in the player community and allow players to recruit without being invasive such as when actually joining alliances and posting invites in chat. MathRocks also wanted features that brought more information about players including alliance battle logs indicating whether a player is on a revenge attack, which player is the opponents, or whether the ally requested playing solo. Juice suggested that a help button be added for defending assisters so that they can call for reinforcements through the alliance battle log. Shanchal wanted to see the game rewarding each alliances’ top assister from month to month with gems, and that there could be a top ranking list for assisting. “Xmas” (from Butterballs) wanted player nectar to fill up faster either after victories or revenge attack victories. “Manish” (from Turkish Delight) wanted to see a bonus for efficient players such that using fewer gods in a victory would reap greater amounts of loot.

I believe that the best suggestion from the focus group came from Manish again, who suggested that the player clock would accelerate when there are no Gods present on the battlefield. This would negate the advantages of using unskilled attack styles such as the scramble but would also lessen the impact of cornertenting. I would go one step further and make the game clock tick down faster based on not having five gods on the battlefield (if five are available). This tweak would resolve issues with cornertenting, Athena Trawling, and Aphrodite Walking exploits. It would also resolve other exploits that seem less prevalent since the addition of Poseidon, such as the Artemis-Apollo walk-around. Idling would be punished and players who rely on idling would have to become more efficient with their attacks in other ways. This would bring greater balance to the game with respect to attack styles and how skill should determine achievement in competitive games. In addition, the Big 4 attack style would have to be revisited and players would have to either accept less clock time for their attacks or add in one of the slow-push gods into the burst team. This would be a powerful tweak to the game which has become tedious as of late due to almost every high level player doing formulaic Big 4 attacks all the time.

Possible additions and tweaks to the game will never provide an exhaustive list, and new content and features are always welcome by players. I believe that it is simply a matter of an indie game studio committing to the player community in bringing the most-requested features and new content. For GoO, this has been new playable characters, a base editor, and alliance wars. Each month that these requests are neglected in favour of more affordable but less desirable options, players are leaving the game and thus reducing the revenue available to put back into the game's development. It is a numbers game to be sure, and the game industry operates on a heteroscedastic economic model for its higher-quality products. Aegis Interactive has created a game with all of the trappings of a big studio title and I believe that if they have been trying to side-step the high-risk nature of developing a globally-appealing and popular mobile game then this has been short-sighted and is doomed to fail.

It may be the case that Aegis is satisfied with the game having reached its peak in early 2017 shortly after the Hera update, and if their operating costs have remained at a typical indie studio level despite the product being of a higher quality then the enterprise may be profitable. I am wary in assuming this to be the case, because I have privately messaged several players to inquire about how they have spent on the game. It isn't to say that I can verify the truth in the numbers given to me, but there are some consistencies between players. In addition, most high level players report to me that they stopped buying gem packs before the Poseidon update (October, 2017), and many previous big spender players have quit the game already. "GxGx" sold his account to a player who is unlikely to spend the way GxGx had been. I sold my account and got back more than half of my total investment on the game. However, the next two high level players who sold their accounts the same week got only a third of their total investment. Some of the whales have suggested making a pact to stop spending money on the game, while players like Rico have quit completely after supposedly spending in excess of 5000USD on the game. Rico likely represents a whole percent of total revenue for the game.

Players have not cited boredom as the primary reason for quitting the game but instead have actively complained about imbalance in attacking to defense, not enough new content, and poor communication with the dev team. Being among the top 100 spenders or top 10 spenders in the game hasn't seemed to stir the Aegis team into prompt replies on email or forum requests, or nudged them into providing clear answers on the future of the game. Big spenders in indie games understand themselves as consumers through the capitalist model by which the industry operates, but they also see themselves as patrons and investors in the game. In these latter roles, there is a fair expectation that the product will reflect some of their needs and values, and that communication with the producers will show a respect for creative input from patrons/investors. I have had a tremendously difficult time communicating with the Aegis team on the forums or through email. They are quite prompt with my simple requests (account name changes), but with real questions most of my messages are left unanswered. I have even offered the team a chance to learn about some of my ideas for new events and alliance wars formats but this too gets no reply. It has been a frustrating experience for many of us but the seeds were

sown early on and it only takes visiting the official Gods of Olympus YouTube channel to fully understand that the dev team has never had much interest in the player community. There are very few replies on user comments on the videos and most of the videos are sterile advertising spots and promo gimmick reels. As previously mentioned, it would seem that cardinal sin for indie game studios is to ignore fans and players through social media platforms, and to let personal pride and feelings get in the way of building a network with the most energetic and enthusiastic players from the game who want nothing more than to spread the word about the game and get more people playing it.

CHAPTER 33

Theories on the Unpopularity of Gods of Olympus

It is certainly clear that Gods of Olympus has become less popular with players who not long ago were enthusiastic about playing it. I cited poor communication with the dev team and slow roll-out of updates with new content as primary reasons for high-level player disenchantment. I have also outlined some of the issues around developing a game with competitive higher order goals for the fundamental and familiar ludic aspects of gameplay while juxtaposing this with a social interaction model and cooperative functionality that evolves in such a way that this development actively undermines a skilled player's pursuit of higher-order goals. Game culture is diversifying so rapidly that casual gamers are stratifying themselves into new categories along a casual-hardcore spectrum, but also appropriating actual hardcore gamers into their own paradigms for what constitutes competitive gameplay.

To a traditional hardcore gamer, use of exploits is typically considered poor and unusable in the pursuit of higher order goal achievement for a game. For the casual gamers who now claim a stakeholder's position in the hardcore gamer category, exploits are part of winning where accumulation of in-game resources determines prestige sooner than how skill was employed to attain those resources. There are many GoO players that consider themselves "hardcore" players of the game while not having adequate skill in the higher order goals of the game. They substitute for skill by fostering a community of assisters that through social-based persuasiveness will come to their aid and help them achieve victories that they are not capable of achieving on their own. Being coddled is not the sign of a hardcore leader while being carried is not the sign of a hardcore attacker or defender in competitive online multiplayer video games. GoO has produced a playing environment that is ambivalent toward casual gamers and highly resistant to hardcore gamers. The shared space has become a site of pressure and tension culturally. This might also explain why younger players have not flocked to the game.

This book outlines and explains many theories on the current unpopularity of Gods of Olympus, but I will be the first to note that things could turn around overnight. Currently, high level players are becoming bored with the same old content and they are

frustrated with repetitive gameplay. Young players have not embraced GoO and there could be several reasons for this from the fact that the game is much more challenging than similar games (full combat control), that there is already a large population of adult players who dominate the culture, or that the game doesn't provide enough instruction early on to help younger players become competent in attacking and designing bases.

The social interaction model of GoO has led to big assisters and meek attackers having authority in alliances and setting the rules, and this can be very discouraging for traditional hardcore gamers. Sweaty, nesting, and snowflake alliance ideologies are common and all anathema to the values of traditional hardcore gamers. Without a surplus of hardcore gamers in GoO it is difficult for the game to gain hype through social media. Most gaming livestreamers are players who pride themselves on being capable and highly competent in the games they play even if they aren't professional gamers as players. KeaGirl noted in her first YouTube video for Gods of Olympus, that she had heard from CoC players that they thought GoO was just another cheap knock-off of Clash of Clans. This misunderstanding might have contributed to the unpopularity of GoO and generally CoC player loyalty to Supercell products might also be a major contributor. Support for Supercell in the player community can often feel like cult following.

Based on the surfeit of comments at YouTube on GoO videos that were player requests for more gods in the game, the unpopularity of GoO may simply be a result of it not being on par with CoC, Overwatch, or League of Legends (and their competitors or knock-offs) with respect to player selection in usable characters. Full combat control is great feature for GoO as compared with CoC, but it means very little if players are bored of using the same characters with the same powers. Overkill expressed in the focus group that GoO may have been more popular in a medieval (like CoC) or military (like Mobile Strike) setting. These settings may have also afforded a more straightforward production of additional playable characters to use. All of the aforementioned theories are popular ones in the player community of the game.

I have developed more exotic explanations which may still be legitimate as factors in explaining the unpopularity of the game without them also being primary causes. I have noted cultural division between local cultures and the global culture of the game. I have watched hundreds of my defense replays, and have fought and assisted in thousands of battles – I can admit that there might be confirmation bias – but the trend has been that foreign-based alliances rely on exploits (especially corner tenting) with much greater frequency than English-based alliances. Player discouragement on the use of exploits is something which I witness and contribute to in English-based alliance chats, whereas I cannot properly probe whether something similar is happening in foreign-based alliances. If it is happening, the message is readily ignored. The disparate values which emerge often keep the foreign-based players from mixing-in with the English-based players. The standards for competition and the philosophy about competitive spirit are fundamentally different in practice when playing GoO for these two broad-based cultural groups. It may be an underdog mentality whereby the community is perceived as being dominated by

English-speakers therefore foreign-based alliances feel that they need to play in underhanded ways to either create intimidation or to ensure victory so that they can compete on the leaderboards and receive some kind of recognition regardless of how it was attained or whether it is positive or negative. Individual players play the game every which way but it would seem that alliance ideology operates differently in certain alliances which tend to have a foreign character.

I have been accused of prejudice for pointing this out – I am indeed prejudiced because the vast majority of exploitative players using underhanded tactics are situated in foreign-based alliances and this has been my experience. I indeed watch my replays and after seeing my loss to corner tenting exploits I assume that the players must be from foreign-based alliances and more than nine times out of ten they are. I cannot deny pattern or math lest I become an irrational idealist who always follows my feelings for what would be nice instead of sticking to reality on what actually happens. Also, for me to ignore this fact pattern is to then irresponsibly miss the opportunity to get at the root of the problem and understand why the trend is what it is.

Is the trend manifesting because English-based alliances oppress foreign-based alliances in other ways and the use of exploits is a retaliatory strike by revolutionary guerillas gamers (English-based alliances almost always have players who complain about the use of non-English in chat). Is the trend manifesting because foreign cultures have a different historical imagination about the themes of the game which dictate that they see greater savagery and dishonour in play as consistent with this historical imagination (the greatest offenders for cheating and exploits in GoO are German, Italian and Turkish alliances, all of which have a distinct historical imagination about polytheism that other national-based cultures likely don't have). Is the trend manifesting because the foreign cultures are also based in economically-turbulent nations (the win-at-all-costs mentality might make more sense for people who live regular life that way out of sheer necessity for survival). Is the trend manifesting because gamer culture is more developed in North America and part of Asia than in Europe and the Middle East (the Chinese and Korean alliances do not tent to corner tent and use other exploits any more than English-based alliances).

Perhaps what games mean to people in Canada, America, Japan, China, and Korea is vastly different than in Italy, Germany, and Turkey. Could it be that the former nations have developed their game cultures through more stages and found that game competition is more like sports – in other words, it is more serious? Could it be that the latter nations don't find games serious enough to care about whether victory is achieved through exploits or through skilled play? The fundamental cultural paradigms about what constitutes respect in gaming may be at odds based on national identity. There are so many questions that I have about why Turkish and Italian alliances in particular have been totally reliant on exploits to achieve in the game. An initial inquiry might be best achieved through discovering outliers and learning how they developed their value system for games. Is there a Turkish or Italian GoO player who strongly disagrees with the use of exploits, and then what is the nature and origin of this value?

I have already encountered English-based (all American) players who play the game with a win-at-all-costs mentality and who have no objections to the use of exploits. Players such as “Justin” are proud Tea Party members who believe that governance is unnecessary and communities should self-regulate even if there is massive victimization while the community negotiates and reforms its highly-transformable Social Contract. I have met other players who are staunch libertarians and feel similarly to Justin. Personally, the lack of governance in virtual spaces is exactly why there is so much bad behaviour online which results in violent crimes, general feelings of fear, fake news, massive amounts of fraud, the purveying of child pornography, and I mine as well stop there. As such, I cannot abide a justification that selfish survivalist behaviour is good, despite readily admitting that I rely on it often for securing myself in the dangerous virtual realm. Is this why exploits are used – because of feelings of fear and unsafety? Is a more isolated and smaller community of players (such as foreign-based alliances) prone to feeling fear and feeling unsafe which then causes them to behave badly through the use of exploits? Needless to say, this topic is controversial enough and exceedingly complex that it deserves a book dedicated to it which I cannot provide at this time.

With all that said, there is a marked divide in the global game culture for GoO. Alliances such as New Era have merged with Sloppy Seconds and become a mix of English-based players and foreign-base players (chat is in English). Some players jump between alliances and foreign-based players often visit English-based alliances. I have spent some time in several foreign-base alliances but I don’t stay long because they are either inactive, their style of play is something I don’t support, or the non-English chat makes me feel alienated. There are many alliances which are tolerant of other languages being written in chat and in the alliance which I created I had no problem with players writing in other languages. As much as the GoO player community forms a global cultural, it doesn’t congeal in a fully cooperative way and local cultural values still clash. The developers decided to not use dedicated servers and there are not local game servers to host matches for all of the European players, or Asian players, etc. As a result, there is tremendous lag in the game, and even if players are not prejudiced by nature, they may not desire playing with foreign-based players if it guarantees a poor quality of experience based on disruptions to the networked service. In the end, I wasn’t going to stay at Sloppy Seconds because the Italian players joining my battles produced significant lags spikes that make playing difficult and sometimes led to losses. The game might have become more popular if Aegis had set up dedicated servers hosted in the United States. I can imagine a lot of serious hardcore gamers will not abide serious lag which hampers their progress and success in a game.

Another exotic theory on the unpopularity of Gods of Olympus is one which will be obtuse for some to understand. GoO has had poor development in America in particular whereas it is incredibly popular in Italy and Turkey (ironically, not Greece). I have wondered at time whether the pagan theme in combination with a large Muslim-based player population is unconsciously upsetting to American gamers. This is a psychoanalytic based argument and I do not suppose that there are conscious

machinations that are making American players reject GoO. Unconsciously, a game which defies the civic monotheistic religion while also incorporating the symbolic enemy of that monotheistic religion may be a compounded psychological block. The theory could be disrupted by noting that young culture is becoming more secular in America, but with the Trump administration it is also clear that cultural isolationism is a dominant value for many Americans in the contemporary moment. It would be interesting to probe deeper on how a pagan theme and Muslim community might trigger many Americans into a radical isolationist stupor. Then again, this hypothesis may be pure confabulation and we may have to recognize that American isolationist ideology isn't simplistic and irrational at its core and therefore a lack of American gamers in GoO has no direct association with the fact that 40% of the players are from non-English-based nations.

This chapter really breaks from the structural analysis which preceded it and explores ideas and notions which may be incorporated or remediated through post-structuralist theories and postmodern philosophy. For me, it is all the initial stages of an inquiry that requires more rigorous and concerted thinking in order to formulate the most pertinent research questions that could provide important knowledge and understanding. As a GoO player, the diasporic nature of GoO is profound and the dysfunctionalities and anomalies of the game as compared with its competitors drive me to ask strange questions. As a player I feel answers floating above me in the ether of discoverable knowledge, but as a player I can also not access them – I am invoked into the simulated world such that the psychological, social, historical, economic, and political referents are difficult to access, if not impossible. As a player, my understanding of the dynamic tension in the global game culture of Gods of Olympus is similar to observing the flits of shadows on the walls of Plato's cave. I am fixed within the context and manacled within the environment, unable to properly discredit what I experience as real.

At the end of the day, there are many compelling or fascinating theories on the unpopularity of Gods of Olympus and perhaps all of them play some kind of role in the overall condition however there are two factors which I believe are broad-based enough to properly explain the gaming world's neglect of GoO overall. The game affords players an opportunity to have their failure witnessed with a spotlight on the performance through the presence of assister players watching the battle. Most people are not interested in this pressure or exposure when playing games (even hardcore gamers rage quit if they know they are the Kill Cam death in Call of Duty, and many hardcore players intentionally play idiotically when required to clutch a round in Gears of War). For the players who stick it out with the potential for social embarrassment while gaming, they then develop oppressive alliance rules to ensure that failure is minimized even if it means slowing player progress and development to a crawl. Most alliances state in their description that assisting comes first despite this being an inefficient way to achieve in the game long term. These anti-social ideologies which seek to use others in order to protect the egos of individuals have the effect of chasing off hardcore gamers who may have thrived in a game environment that provides a spotlight on performance and greater challenges in gameplay and mechanics than other games of its genre. The spotlight on

failure chases off most young players, reduces many players to grunt assist labourers, and develops alliance ideologies that are anti-hardcore which in turn keeps hardcore gamers away and thus reduces social media exposure for the game.

The second reason for the unpopularity of GoO is folded-in with the first – lack of social media hype and advertising. A lack of hardcore gamers means no livestreaming of GoO battles at Twitch TV and very little gameplay footage at YouTube. In addition, Aegis Interactive has done very little to promote their game through social media. I have developed an explanation that the lack of hype generated by the dev team is because they always intended to sell the game to a leading competitor. The GoO model is based on correcting exploitative aspects of CoC (built times, resource raiding, etc.) but those exploitative aspects of CoC are what contribute to it being such a profitable game. I believe that Aegis doesn't want a lot of media hype about Gods of Olympus because this would establish a brand that would then be more difficult for a company to rebrand if they were buying the game and altering it to operate more like Supercell build-and-battle games. This first community of GoO players are guinea pigs to demonstrate that the game can be popular and can induce players toward spending hundreds or thousands of dollars.

In all honesty, I hope that the game is bought by a leading competitor such as Supercell because although the game would become too expensive for me to compete in, it would be nice to see new content added regularly and to have a chance at battling in a properly organized alliance wars. In addition, all of the work that I have done for the game would get better recognition. Given that I am not well-versed in the business end of the game industry, I would have no idea as to whether Aegis does intend to sell the game or whether they have prospective buyers already. It is inevitably a game which would dominate the market if developed properly and I can imagine E-Sports events and leagues forming around the game to bolster its appeal and foster a dedicated population of fans.

Cornertent solution

Apollo-arte walkaround solution

Cooked army solution

Community

*AJ alliance rule (yt ratings are fake video)

*Inactivity charts and other charts and stat-tracking

*GoO global

*the forums

*device linking