

Lost in the Clouds:

Networks of Failure in Aegis Interactive's Gods of Olympus

Abstract:

Aegis Interactive's mobile build-and-battle strategy game, *Gods of Olympus* (2016), provides an important case study for illustrating the impact that failure in one aspect of a game experience can have on other aspects. To contextualize the problem, I will rely on a comprehensive auto-ethnography as well as interviews with several players from the game. The research must go beyond the player community within *Gods of Olympus* in order to properly understand the dynamic interplay of the game with other social media platforms, specifically inquiring how those channels of communication mediated between platforms and the players using them can break down and become inefficient for promoting a game and sharing a game experience with broader audiences.

There is a gap in the research for game studies with respect to the concept of game failure, and although game studies theorist, Jesper Juul (2013), has provided a thorough account of individual-based failure for performance and gameplay, there remains important work to be done for understanding how a circuit of culture framework articulates interconnectedness in the failure of games within the aspects of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. The circuit of culture theory forwarded by Paul du Gay et al. (1997) is a sophisticated and nuanced development in Stuart Hall's (1973) seminal encoding/decoding model of communication, and it can be reapplied from cultural studies to game studies in order to understand how different aspects of a game (as cultural object) interact and affect each other.

Research Problematic:

It is of general importance to learn how failure occurs because we are a rational-based, intelligent species that often measures happiness through our success in life. We have a tendency to disavow or occlude failure in our experiences and this renders failure a "dark" factor with respect to understanding phenomena that is most meaningful to us. As such, it is highly relevant to examine failure in games because the game industry is evolving with new technologies and designs, the player base for gaming is expanding to include a broader section of society, players are demanding more meaningful experiences through

developments such as e-Sports, and games are becoming the dominant form of popular media in the contemporary landscape – in short, gaming is becoming the ubiquitous media form for human experience.

Without a proper understanding of the complex interplay with aspects of a game and how failure in one aspect can cause failure in another, the game industry risks repeating mistakes in production and players are exposed toward developing problematic game cultures and inadequate strategies when playing a game. Like Gods of Olympus, future games may end up failing the industry as commercial products as well as failing the player community as cultural objects for learning and pleasurable experience.

In 2017, I chose to invest hundreds of hours into playing the mobile game, Gods of Olympus. What I accomplished in the game went far beyond the goals of most players of any video game. I produced hundreds of gameplay videos that mixed critique, teaching, fiction-based performance, and personal opinion, and I then uploaded this original content to YouTube. Through other para-textual platforms to the game (Line, Facebook, the official discussion forums at GodsofOlympus.com), I became a *cultural curator* for the player community. However, after incredible investment of my time and energy, I watched as Gods of Olympus began to wane in interest with the players and fade away in the collective imagination articulated through social media. The studio that produced the game, Aegis Interactive, slowed their rolling-out of major updates and many of the most elite, skilled players uninstalled the application. The feeling I experienced was similar to the moment when one realizes the fireworks show has come to an end or that the roller coaster ride is taking its final bend.

It would be fair to write that Gods of Olympus has failed. Of course, this statement is conditional as there are still hundreds of people playing the game and the servers for the game have yet to be taken offline. Additionally, failure in many ways is relative and it must be explained what the standard of success is firstly in order to appreciate how there has been a true measure of failure. Finally, intention, although challenging to qualify, can reveal how what might have been - but which did then not materialize - constitutes a condition for failure. Failure is a difficult concept to grasp not only for its highly subjective nature when qualified, but because we also have a pervasive tendency and powerful desire to want to hide our failure or allow our failure to be occluded by our success.

My proposed research is not to embrace a fatalistic “power of negative thinking” approach, but to demonstrate how failure in games is a rich and complex discursive

environment with myriad interactions that affect producers (game studios, live-streamers, ‘influencers’) and consumers (players, audiences) in unique ways. The circuits of communication between and within the community of producers and consumers can fail at the level of regulation, a game can fail to represent what the players or studios intended it to, and the players can fail in their modes of identification as particular types of gamers (casual, social, hardcore) as they come up short in their personal expectations for play and achievement with the game.

We might appreciate why failure matters in life – survival depends on forms of success, while learning isn’t possible without moments of failure. In some ways, my research hopes to extend this logic to games in that the survival of a game in the commercial market depends on forms of success, while learning for players isn’t possible once they have disengaged with a game because the experience of failure is a pervasive and overbearing one.

Literature Review:

Failure frames player experience by virtue of a game being designed to be challenging and thus always presenting the real possibility for failure. Juul (2013) notes that what games do is to promise the player that they can repair a personal inadequacy – an inadequacy that the game produces in the player in the first place. Juul argues that games must present failure so that player skills are improved and failure is overcome – this is the fundamental sense of enjoyment that derives from playing games. Game emotions theorist, Nicole Lazzaro (2008), suggests that the negative emotions associated with the potential for failure is what binds us to the game - we engage when something is at stake. Failure is an important part of human experience but also an essential aspect of gaming experience. Through Juul and Lazzaro’s work on failure in games, certain experiences of consumption, representation and identity can be gauged; however, Juul and Lazzaro provide a fixed point for inquiry which is set up from the perspective of player experience and individualized player psychology.

The video game industry is relatively new among media forms and remains resistant to enacting consistent self-regulation policies (similar to the film industry a century earlier) (Kocurek, 2009). This resistance may reflect anxieties about the effectiveness of new forms of piracy (Livermore, 2015), apprehension regarding censorship of representations which could otherwise make for popular products (Finn, 2015), as well as a professional sensibility regarding rapid technological advancement in game technology not being

stifled through the impediment of bureaucratic red tape (Lipson, 2015). As such, game studios can engage in inequitable business practices, indie game studios can be subject to oppression through competitor oligopolistic conglomeration, and players can be subject to exploitation as both an unpaid labour force and with respect to paying increasingly exorbitant prices for full gaming experiences with particular games.

Instability in the structural organization of the game industry, as well as inconsistency in its practices make it rife with examples of failure – from bankrupted studios (Nichols, 2015) to spectacular flops for individual games (Statt, 2017), and from issues of sexual-based discrimination at studios (Crecente, 2016) and within gamer communities (Hudson, 2014) to government hearings and tribunals that address accusations made against studios regarding their alleged construction of games' revenue models in concert with core gameplay loops such that gameplay intentionally encourages a kind of gambling addiction (Good, 2017). There is a surfeit of literature exploring failure in the game industry at the level of production and regulation, however this work has not sought to use a single case study for a game and postulate how failure in production or regulation impacts failure in representation or identity. As such, this literature does not focus on the circuit of culture for games per se, and instead it typically forwards singular political, technological, or economic-based arguments about the basic structure and shifting operation of the game industry.

Studios may have specific approaches to avoiding failure with their game products while players employ particular playing strategies and playstyles to achieve success with games. In addition, a game culture can develop negotiated rule sets or community standards for remaining open, inclusive, and cooperative. Game studios may fail by not building robust engines, or through not optimizing game code, or not implementing agile development strategies; however, in the case of Aegis Interactive, the most interesting element of failure at the level of production may be in how the plans for more equitable play hampered the studio's ability to develop a successful revenue model to remain competitive with its direct rivals (such as Supercell's Clash of Clan). Game design theorist, Doris Rusch (2016), provides an approach for "deep" game design which illustrates how aesthetic, ethical, and industrial priorities are challenging to marry, while balancing game design for political as well as economic success has many pitfalls.

Players often rely on forms of dark play to overcome failure in games. Game studies theorist, Mia Consalvo (2008) notes that dark play has potential to disturb the flow of communication in such a way that players may experience social ostracism, alienation, and marginalization. Scholarship has interpreted the ontology of dark play through a

variety of theoretical approaches, from structural-historical (Juul, 2005) to legally-deterministic (Bainbridge, 2010), to psychoanalytic (Holmes, 2010), and neo-/post-Marxist (Galloway, 2006). Consalvo (2007) approaches the concept of dark play from a player studies perspective and identifies different forms of dark play while explaining some of the rationale for players in their using dark play to avoid personal failure. Consalvo recognizes how the individual-based strategies to avoid failure can impact failure in the broader player community and game culture. She advocates for self-governance with respect to defining “cheating” and meting out punishment for transgression. Consalvo also cites philosopher and ethicist, Sissela Bok, who believes that when strategies for avoiding failure involve deception, trust is eroded and communities collapse.

Game studies has been quick to recognize how game cultures often fail to manage their subgroups as well as restricting individuals who express unpopular, or even toxic, messages within a player community. For example, there is no shortage of literature on how sexism in games causes experiences of social failure for players, player communities, and game cultures, and recent publications from Fox & Tang (2014), Kowert et al. (2015) and Wilhelm (2016) illustrate that it is a problem yet to be properly resolved by the game industry or society at large. Additionally, playstyles can impact the dynamics within game cultures where Richard Bartle (1996) and Nick Yee (2006) recognize that a game culture requires a particular condition of balance for satisfying the varying motivations, dispositions, and preferences of players. Bartle warns that when there is imbalance in playstyles, the game community collapses and the game fails. Again, although there is a surfeit of literature dealing with individual issues of failure as it relates to games and game culture, most, if not all of that work restricts its inquiry to one or two of the aspects outlined in the du Gay et al. circuit of culture framework.

Critical gaps remain in the scholarship with respect to using a holistic framework to explain an important phenomenon such as failure for a culturally important activity such as gaming. However, some authors have already imported the circuit of culture model to game studies for study of specific areas of game culture. Media technology researcher, Enrico Gandolfi (2016), applies the circuit of culture framework to the livestream gaming platform, Twitch.TV. Gandolfi’s examination has a pivot point which is not located with a game as the central cultural object of study, but instead he articulates a network of meaningful communication using the Twitch platform as focus. Game designer, Sebastian Deterding (2016), invites platform studies theorists in gaming to consider the circuit of culture model as a conceptual tool for understanding the economic ebb and flows of the game industry. Deterding’s work seeks to connect production, regulation, and representation, but he doesn’t properly address player experience, nor is he specifically

concerned with failure in one aspect being a cause for failure in other aspects. Like Gandolfi, a game is not his central object of study, but instead Deterding is interested in gaming platforms generally.

There have been other offerings for the cultural studies circuit of culture framework to guide scholarship in game studies. Media business theorist, Aphra Kerr (2006), explores the entire production cycle of games using the discursive logic from the circuit of culture model. Her analysis has a central pivot around industrial production as it concerns business and economics, while failure in games and game production as a participatory medium is not a primary focus of her work. Ardevol et al. (2009) examine playfulness and transformative play in converting a game product into a new cultural object. Their work suggests the usefulness of importing the circuit of culture model to games in that the game consumer can become a producer. A lot of this early work in marrying cultural studies with game studies recognizes Henry Jenkins's (2006) work on games as participatory media. Jenkins's work suggests that there are blurred lines between audience and producer/designer, or production and consumption such that new distinctions must be made in theory which cultural studies canon did not necessarily foresee or predict. The circuit of culture model is a provocative segue for the traditional cultural studies theoretical communication models which address non-interactive forms of media, shifting to theory devised specifically for forms of new media which rely on participatory cultures and interactive usage.

This literature review reveals that there is foundational thought in academia for my proposed research, but that there is also a gap in scholarship for the particular issue of articulating the important concept of failure in games through the use of a robust and comprehensive theoretical model such as the circuit of culture. New media scholars have already pointed to the relevance of using the circuit of culture model when explaining the meaning of cultural objects based in participatory cultures and interactive media. At the same time, Juul has shown that the concept of failure in games has currency and is a ubiquitous quality of gaming experience.

Theoretical Approach:

The "circuit of culture" is offered as a theoretical framework for an approach to cultural studies. Within the circuit, a cultural artefact, object, or product is analyzed and explored through all of its complexity and contingency (du Gay et al., 1997). The circuit involves five aspects or "moments" of a cultural object: representation, identity, production,

consumption, and regulation. Nieborg and Hermes (2008) argue that games studies has great value within the discipline of cultural studies by virtue of the central attention game studies gives to the aspect of production for how games produce meaning. The circuit of culture theory has been re-worked to account for new forms of co-creation and participation in cultural production. Tombleson and Wolf (2017) look at hashtag activism on social media platforms to argue for a shift from articulating the work of cultural intermediaries as ‘middle-men’ (founded in Bourdieu’s initiation of the concept of “new cultural intermediaries”) to understanding intermediaries as “cultural curators”. The concept of cultural curation would be important to the ethnographic components of my research and would help to establish some of the shifts between production and consumption that the circuit of culture model implies.

The academic disciplines that guide my research are communication studies, cultural studies, and game studies. The theoretical thrust for research is based in reception theory and would utilize the developments with Stuart Hall’s seminal model of communication - encoding/decoding - where the circuit of culture model becomes a natural terminus to the logic of Hall’s work. Umberto Eco’s (1972) “aberrant decoding”, John Fiske’s (1986) “polysemy”, and Katherine Hayles’s (2004) “deep code” are concepts that provide nuanced developments for the encoding/decoding model which may also have important applications to particular areas of failure in *Gods of Olympus*. For example, aberrant decoding may illuminate on how failed communication of messages with respect to “preferred readings” motivate players to use exploits in the game, polysemy might suggest how a surfeit of meaning in social interactions operating within player-based alliances in the game encourages the development of an array of problematic alliance ideologies, and deep code could explain how the contradictory mechanical-functional model and social interaction model of the game can co-exist despite those contradictions causing disruptions to communication in the player community and game culture.

There is a lineage in the theoretical development of Hall’s encoding/decoding model which not only should receive some attention when applying a holistic framework such as the circuit of culture model toward the study of a cultural object, but which must be accounted for in support of that holistic model. Juul’s work can guide an understanding of why failure motivates the player to use exploits in the game, Eco’s conceptual tool provides a way for understanding how the use of exploits constitutes an example of game failure, while the circuit of culture model can situate how the player experience affects, and is affected by, other aspects of *Gods of Olympus*. For example, Aegis Interactive has had dozens of elite players lodge formal complaints about the use of exploits in the game, with some documentation available through the official online forums, and other

publicized complaints being available on social media within the audio commentary of gameplay videos. The studio has chosen to ignore these complaints and the exploits remain – failure in production and regulation (a studio ignoring its player base and not rebalancing gameplay) affects failure in identity (players come to identify as cheaters through their use of dark play exploits while other players alter their playstyle in self-defeating ways).

Game production failure would focus on how Aegis has mismanaged their property and botched many of the basic post-Beta developmental stages (viral marketing, regular updates, re-balancing gameplay, etc.). However, it is also important to recognize that an indie studio with a Triple-A quality product will encounter many natural obstacles as a result of the limited staff and lack of financial resources. The work of Whitson et al. (2017) on indie game industry “intermediation” provides important insight for how failure for indie studios can sometime be inevitable, while challenging the hegemonic rule of the Triple-A studios has the potential to challenge the status quo of the industry and bring about new forms of agency and a new generation of game successes for smaller studios (much the same way that the film industry was transformed after the 1948 Paramount Decree which benefitted indie producers). Consalvo’s (2007) work on “gaming capital” (re-worked from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital”) can be applied to players but may also have important applications for studios. With respect to gaming capital, it may be the case that a game studio operates similarly to a bank for the players of that game, and when the bank is robbed or goes bankrupt – and if it becomes insolvent – the player community also finds itself destitute with respect to personal gaming capital.

Understanding player experience failures builds from Juul’s work on the “paradox of failure” in games. Certain playstyles may develop based on the dispositions of different players, but this variety of playstyles must remain balanced within the game community or the community will collapse (Bartle, 1996). Gods of Olympus has not afforded the player community a fair opportunity to have success with the full range of playstyles that were originally developed by players, and some updates have altered gameplay such that success with particular playstyles is no longer viable. This has caused many players to quit the game (as Bartle warned would happen in his seminal piece on playstyles in MUD games). The restriction for playstyles has caused other players to turn to transgressive forms of play (from hacking, cheating and use of exploits to malicious farming). There are several game studies scholars who have worked on the concept of “dark play” in games, and Marcus Carter’s (2015) examination of insidious collusion in the game EVE Online could have important applications to understanding the use of exploits, such as “cornertenting”, in Gods of Olympus.

Failure in the game culture of GoO might be understood best through Juul's concept of "casual revolution" (Juul, 2009) or Consalvo's concept of "hardcore-casual" (Consalvo, 2009). The game industry is undergoing a massive transformation at present, whereby "hardcore" gamers are being actively challenged as the opinion-leaders and primary stakeholders in global game culture. Casual gamers (who play for fun and make competition a tertiary value) have begun to assert their value system as paramount for the development of global game culture, however in challenging hardcore gamers the casual gamers must sometimes adopt and then adapt hardcore gamer values. GoO has been a breeding ground for these kinds of transformative performances and the social interaction model of the game has led to many casual gamers becoming "hardcore". The communication failures between the two traditional types of players (casual and hardcore) have led to the formation of particular alliance ideologies which can often result in toxicity and anti-social behaviour, however the emergent social-hardcore gamer has not become an inspiring mediator. Additionally, the GoO game culture propagates the para-textual, where apps, websites, and platforms external to the actual game are used by the player community to communicate and interact. There has been an abundance of controversy over toxicity and trolling through the group chat app, Line, which hundreds of GoO players use on a daily basis. It would be fair to say that the use of Line has been a failure for the GoO player community, despite the efforts of some players to migrate users over to the more stable and gamer-friendly app, Discord.

These are some of the concepts and theories which fit best with the four areas of failure that I am interested in examining: production failure, player experience failure, game culture failure, and studio-player communication failure (each of which touch on every aspect in the circuit of culture model). Once I establish the links in the discursive network of failure for Gods of Olympus, another set of concepts may emerge as highly relevant. With that said the disciplines of communication studies, cultural studies, and game studies will remain as the academic paradigm for where my research will be focused.

Research Questions:

As preamble to the official, distilled research questions, it is worth mentioning the logic which leads to the formation of the primary research questions.

In the circuit of culture model, the aspect of representation is concerned with how meaning is conveyed and represented in language, both oral and visual. For my research, it would be important to establish how Gods of Olympus represents through the game, as well as through para-text, such as YouTube, official online forums, Facebook, Line, and Discord. From there, the question of representation is asked again with respect to failure – how does Aegis Interactive fail to convey their preferred meaning to the players, or how do players fail to represent the game as an enjoyable and rewarding experience through other platforms such as YouTube?

The aspect of identity examines how meaning is internalized by the players or player community. For example, why do players choose to identify as GoO players as opposed to Clash of Clans players, or as build-and-battle strategy game players, or as achievers, explorers (and the other player types)? Why are most of the elite GoO players much older than the average age of Clash of Clans players? What are the reasons for there being a disproportionate number of female alliance leaders in the top ten alliances of the game? Why is the game particularly popular with Turkish and Italian players? These questions can be re-posed to consider failure – how have GoO gameplay videos failed to inspire Clash players to try the game, why have so many players failed to internalize the value of higher-order goals (trophy count, player rank) into their playing experience?

Questions around production have been alluded to and perhaps the most important aspect of production that must be addressed regards Aegis's failure to roll-out a regular schedule of updates. What impact does that have on players? What role did the ideal of equitable play have in this failure? How has equitable play affected consumption of the game? How does this constitute a failure (i.e. tapering revenue)? What are the failed channels of distribution for the game? Why has Aegis ignored interacting with their fans on social media platforms? What impact does that neglect have on other aspects such as representation and identity?

There is a rich discursive network – in fact two – and two sets of questions must always be asked: what is GoO doing? And how is what GoO doing constituting failure? The latter question must also consider the broader questions of failure in games existing outside of any particular game: what is failure in games? Why do we fail as players? Why do games fail as products? How do we fail as players? How do game cultures fail their community? Why and how does communication fail within game experience?

All of the aforementioned questions contextualize the primary research questions:

- How and why does failure in one aspect of GoO affect other aspects of GoO? (circuit of culture)
- What is the impact on the game industry and global game culture when GoO fails?
- What is the impact on the player community of GoO when GoO fails?
- What is the impact on a GoO player when GoO fails?
- How and why has Gods of Olympus failed, and did failure in one aspect of the game have greater impact than the other aspects?

The particulars of the case study may hopefully lead to some general warnings for the game industry, and might also provide recommendations for how a game can be more successful as a commercial product for business and as a cultural product for people.

Du Gay et al. used the Sony Walkman as the central cultural object for their theorization of the circuit of culture because the Walkman was a “typical” medium of modern culture which would reveal how societies of that era worked. Undoubtedly, the Walkman was a success as a commercial product. I use Gods of Olympus as the central cultural object for my research because of its atypical nature (I’m studying failure as opposed to success): it is an indie product competing directly against Triple-A products, it boasts features designed specifically for equitable play, its player demographics are atypical of the subgenre of mobile build-and-battle games, and a surplus of players report that their communication with Aegis Interactive is the worst experience they have had with any game studio. Needless to say, there is some unravelling to be done and the circuit of culture model is an ideal tool for the task. Du Gay et al. recognize that the aspects of a cultural object “continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways” and this suggests that understanding the impact of failure within the circuit is critical because failure in one aspect risks a cascading effect that would eventually impact the entire circuit.

Methodology:

- 1) *Quantitative: Surveys and Statistics*
- 2) *Qualitative: Player Interviews*
- 3) *Hermeneutics: Auto-Ethnographic History*

- 1) *Quantitative: Surveys and Statistics*

Surveys: I have already created some initial surveys for the GoO players at a group I made using Line app (the external chat app of choice for the player community). The group is named “Odds of Olympus” and at first I invited the players to help in creating a list of changes or new content that they were most interested in seeing for the game. I also invited players to speculate on the future of the game by suggesting a date when the main servers would go offline.

I would endeavor to create more comprehensive surveys with a definite list of possible changes or new content for the game, and then have players vote their order of priority. I think that gender, age, nation, player level in the game, average time playing the game daily, and the date when the player installed the game would be important variables to account for.

Surveys could also be created to determine how many alliances players had played in, or ranking their priorities for play in the game (attacking, defending, assisting, etc.) as well as playstyle (“slow-push”, “burst”, farming, etc.).

The surveys may reveal some quantitative evidence to support theories on the formation of particular alliance ideologies. Surveys may also provide important information regarding the differences between casual and hardcore players in the game.

I have already done a lot of survey work on the game’s promotion and hype in social media. I have surveyed comments on videos focused on the game hosted at YouTube as well as collecting data on comments and postings at the official forums and GoO Facebook page. This has been important in establishing the lack of communication between players/fans and the developers.

Statistics: I have already done a lot of “number crunching” for aspects of the game. These statistics can help with an understanding on “whales” (big money spenders) or how alliances are organized around particular priorities or ideologies. For example, one of my statistical tables suggests Janus is a more social alliance composed of casual gamers than the alliance, Legends – Legends has many top 100 ranked players but their assist numbers are low whereas Janus has high assist numbers and many elite, veteran players, yet not many top 100 players. In combination with survey work, these statistics could be better supported.

2) Qualitative: Player Interviews

The subjects for my player interviews would be a mix of elite, veteran players from the game. I already have a few dozen subjects lined-up based on them volunteering to be interviewed about the game (a poll I posted in the Odds of Olympus Line group). I would like to approach other players such as “whales”, or exploiters and hackers. These players are expected to be less likely to be interviewed because there is a measure of shame in their approach to gameplay (ie. throwing money at it, or cheating). In fact, Juul might consider being a whale or exploiter as a form of failure – self-defeating behaviour. These players may require some kind of monetary/giveaway incentive or a guarantee of anonymity in order to participate in an interview. I know most of the veteran, elite players in the game from having spent a considerable amount of time playing in many alliances and being one of the most skilled and successful players in the game. I have also been one of the most vocal critics of the game and most active players in the game with respect to using social media to promote or review the game.

Some details that I already know about the players is that the average age is high (compared with other games in the subgenre) and many of the veteran, elite players are parents. In some cases, I already know details about their daily lives such as their career, their real names, and their family structure.

It would be important to interview players not only about the game and in-game play, but about their use of chat apps such as Line (which many players use), their use of the official Facebook group, the official forums (godsofolympus.com), or their use of YouTube player videos or promotional videos for the game. The para-textual is arguably where fandom is created and where participatory culture is forged. It would be important to know about the relationship that players have with the development team (Aegis Interactive) and how they compare this relationship with those they may have had with other game studios.

The interviews provide an opportunity to substantiate my theory and help in parsing aspects in the game experience as well as revealing where the lines are blurred. The surveys will help in letting me know what I’m writing about and the interviews will show me how to write about it. Ideally, I would like to be able to interview Jay Abney, Gary Doughty and Mark Doughty (the Aegis team), but they have proven to be uninterested in communication with the players, and especially many of their outspoken critics. If anything, being unable to interview the developers may constitute support for an argument that the game has failed in critical ways with respect to the relationship between the studio and the fans.

3) Hermeneutics: Auto-Ethnographic History

I have already created over 300 gameplay and review videos for the game. I have also written a lengthy manuscript describing my history with the game, including the alliances I joined, my experiences with particular players, and initiatives I made with the game through social media or other platforms external to the game itself.

I have intentionally crafted my virtual persona as an agent provocateur – a kind of Howard Stern-type mouthpiece. In that respect, it is important to examine my own failures in promoting the game and to examine how the multicultural game community found particular opinions of mine abrasive or insensitive (despite them perhaps being accurate, truthful, and productive within the context of the game). I have already created in the minds of many players the type of person I am, and most cannot distinguish the performance from reality. However, this is advantageous for a few important reasons.

As an elite player, known as highly skilled and knowledgeable in the game, it is important that players who I interview not pander to me with their responses. Because my in-game persona has been a standoffish one (and at times unappealing), I don't need to worry as much about pandering and there is a better chance that I will get honest, forthright answers from my interviewees.

Secondly, if I was a relative unknown player in the game showing up now to interview veteran, elite players, many would feel confident in portraying themselves in idealized terms. A player such as Warhammer may leave out a record of his game rage, or Volkan might deny that he is a notorious cheater. Given that these players know that the wool cannot be pulled over my eyes (I am aware of their playstyle and personality in the game, and they know this), there is a better chance at getting truthful, honest answers from players in the interviews.

The trade-off of course is that many players will refuse to be interviewed by me because they don't respect my character and wouldn't care to help in my projects. I believe that the trade-off is worth it. I'd rather have honest answers from a few than confabulation and aggrandizement from many. I strongly believe that most interviewing in academia suffers from the problems I have just outlined. In this case, double-blind conditions or anything of the sort (to remove potential bias) are not useful, as players tend toward describing their play in idealized terms when the interviewee is unknown to them.

I see my mixed-methods approach as a triangulation technique for cross-referencing conclusions from my research. My auto-ethnographic work provides personal insight into the failure of Gods of Olympus, the interviews can double-check those insights for relevance and make sure that my opinions aren't a massive outlier. That is to say, has the game actually failed or is it simply my perception that it has failed because either I have failed, or the game has failed me? It would still matter that the game has only failed select players. The survey and statistical work should help quantify some of the suggested failures, especially with respect to playstyles and alliance ideologies – vis-à-vis Bartle's claim that imbalance in playstyle will lead to the player community collapsing and the game failing.

The methods are geared for a player studies approach therefore my research could be seen as primarily belonging to player studies but utilizing theory which makes conclusions relevant for game studies, cultural studies, and communication studies.

Requested Resources:

My research may involve aforementioned 'incentives' for interviewees. The interviews would be most useful to the study if I was able to commandeer interviewees that were at first reluctant to participate. This would ensure that I had categories of players included who normally don't provide feedback and insight into their motivations to play and reasons to engage with the game in specific ways (i.e. whales spending and cheaters exploiting).

Ideally, it would be nice to establish good rapport with the development team (Aegis Interactive) and involve them in my study by way of interviews. This may also require incentives of some kind. Perhaps, suggesting that I would make a cross-continental trip to meet with them (they are based in Houston, Texas) would show them that I am a legitimate researcher of their game and not just an "annoying" or "pesky" critic.

Chapter Breakdown:

Chapter 1 – Introduction: problematic stated, circuit of culture and paradox of failure explained, lit review for failure in games, introduction to methods, introduction to the cultural object of study (Gods of Olympus)

Chapter 2 – Representation: GoO in its subgenre, player demographics, Aegis goals of equitable play, alliance ideologies (*overlap and contingencies; methods)

Chapter 3 – Identity: playstyles, dark play, whales, livestreaming and online reviewers, gender and leadership, casual vs hardcore (*overlap and contingencies; methods)

Chapter 4 – Production: indie intermediation, gaming capital, indie vs Triple A, cultural curation (*overlap and contingencies; methods)

Chapter 5 – Consumption: F2P model, GoO vs CoC, agile development and updates, platform preference such as Line or YouTube and not Discord or Twitch (*overlap and contingencies; methods)

Chapter 6 – Regulation: player-studio communication, studio marketing, negotiated rules for dark play and farming, whales (*overlap and contingencies; methods)

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: problematic re-stated, primary research question answered, what was left out and justifications, what is left to be done and why it matters

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