

# How Video Game Techno-Governance Shapes Social Interaction

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## I. Introduction

Social governance practices involving game technology are enacted via hardware and software design and modification. Hardware-based techniques include territorial and regional 'lockouts'<sup>1</sup>—for example, inserting region-specific chips in game consoles or using IP addresses to block game usage outside of stipulated areas. Software can also be modified to establish and revise game rules. Both types of modifications can affect player community size and composition, as well as the ways that players act and interact.

Playing with old and new friends adds value to both game products and gaming experiences. Many participants are attracted by the social nature of gameplay and the rich experiences available to them. Game companies use code to control game rules that affect many facets of game-related social interactions, including but not limited to participant senses of presence and social ambience, of fairness maintained by system rules and social norms, and of naturally evolving trust in a community. In short, game world dynamics are both sensitive and subject to manipulation by developers and publishers.

However, games are still relegated to a marginal position in technology research, resulting in their less-visible social influences and qualities being overlooked, even by participating players. When a game system manager makes adjustments to rules and settings, players may not understand the sources of such adjustments, or realise that such changes are based on data collected on their prior game behaviours. They may not realise that a server inflation problem was diminished due to a company's decision to increase raw materials or to modify either environmental settings or game rules so as to reduce player demand. When surrounded by various game characters in a teeming game scene, individuals may find it difficult to distinguish between avatars controlled by real players and those controlled by code. Today's gaming worlds are marked by growing numbers of game societies and groups involved in complex rela-

tionships, with players coming from different political, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The question arises as to whether their real-world relationships are being altered by the spillover effects of game world techno-governance.

The issues of techno-governance become overt in the rapid expansion and widespread adoption of gamification applications. In the past few years, gamification, the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts, has been enthusiastically used to encourage user engagement, to improve organisational productivity, to better motivate learning and health management, to boost political campaign, and so on. The intention of using game design to make participant behavioural modification is clear in these non-game contexts, yet not so obvious in gaming contexts. In this essay we will pinpoint the potential effects of behavioural monitoring and alterations by game technology, and bring the hidden technology to the foreground.

Three game types will be used to illustrate differences in social characteristics and associated techno-governance issues:

1. Console games are often thought as 'single player', and therefore, produce 'personal' rather than 'social' gameplay experiences. But in fact console game players form their communities as well. They actively share experiences, gaming tips, and other game-related information via the internet with other players/fans of their beloved games. These practices, although occurring outside the game, are by no means 'personal'.
2. MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) are considered remarkable in the ways they bring

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1 Barry Ip and Gabriel Jacobs, 'Territorial lockout: An international issue in the videogames industry' (2004) 16 *European Business Review* 511–521

together large numbers of players from many parts of the world to multiple servers, thus allowing them to gather in the form of digital bodies or avatars in grand virtual scenarios. Players cooperate and compete with each other while building new in- and out-of-game social networks and friendship circles, sharing feelings about game worlds and their daily lives, debating socio-political issues and cultural values, and developing rich and complex communities. Since the appearance of Ultima Online in 1997, many well-known MMOGs such as World of Warcraft (WoW) (2004) have persisted for 10 years or more, with large groups of players ‘living together’ for extended periods of time. In the face of changing market environments and player compositions, game companies must regularly provide new game content and alter existing scenarios and rules in response to social issues that arise from a constantly evolving player ecology. Due to the enduring nature of MMOG worlds, they are the most likely to give individuals from different geographic locations and social categories sufficient time to develop social relationships.

3. The popularity of smartphones has resulted in a significant expansion in casual mobile games. Unlike console games or MMOGs that tend to be fixed in specific locations and played during specific hours, mobile games can be flexibly played in almost any environment in-between other life activities. While many mobile games are also capable of connecting multiple players online, the majority of them are turn-based, with short-lived interactions involving players who come together in a random fashion. Accordingly, mobile game companies are searching for creative ways to reduce waiting times and to instil lively atmospheres that reduce the potential for losing customers. One common tactic is the use of programmed characters. Although technically similar to the use of plug-in bots in MMOGs—a practice frequently criticised by game companies and communities as ‘cheating’—it has significantly different ethical implications.

## II. Cases and Analysis

Digital game technologies allow individuals from all parts of the world to play across geographic and so-

cial boundaries, but with artificial border controls and roadblocks based on hardware design, and with software settings created for commercial and game management considerations. For console games, digital boundaries rely on hardware chips that support territorial lockouts—thus, certain Taiwanese game consoles cannot be used to play Japanese versions. In contrast, many MMOG companies rely on server assignments for the same purpose—WoW has separated Chinese-language servers in two East Asian regions (Taiwan/Hong Kong/Macao and China), even though the first server block now encompasses areas under different governments and different political systems. Operational policies supported by these kinds of design control features can determine which groups of individuals can or cannot interact and form communities.

Whereas digital world boundary settings are affected by online game server assignments, adjustments to environmental parameters and game rules are frequently used to regulate player interactions. For example, players might be required to collect raw materials such as ores, herbs, and leather to make virtual items such as weapons, equipment, food, or medicines, and game companies can use their programming access to dynamically regulate supplies. Adjustments can either make it more difficult for players to collect materials, or release them from time-consuming material-gathering tasks, thereby giving them more freedom to engage in other game-related activities. Since the needs and wants of individual players are affected by game rules, these kinds of setting and content adjustments exert obvious effects on intra-group dynamics. Rules can be manipulated to divide players into camps for aggressive competition, or to encourage them to cooperate in order to achieve specific goals. Similarly, environmental parameters can be adjusted in ways that affect resource quantities, thus prompting players to either coexist peacefully or interact in hostile competition.

Here we will use a large-scale immigration scenario involving two WoW communities as an example of how a game company can elicit technical responses involving digital boundaries and environmental rules. Due to a long delay in the release of the second WoW expansion in China, hundreds of thousands of Chinese players ‘illegally’ moved their accounts to Taiwanese servers in 2008, part of a three-year mass migration that we called a ‘cyber-diaspora’

in an earlier paper.<sup>2</sup> The migration resulted in unprecedented numbers of daily interactions between players from two countries whose official relationship has long been marked by limited contact and political tension. The consistent flow of cross-border contacts resulted in heated exchanges between Chinese and Taiwanese players over issues such as queuing, lag time resulting from insufficient bandwidth, and frustrating gaming experiences. Public channels were filled with political quarrels focused on national and ethnic identities. Taiwanese players used the term ‘locust plague’ to describe the influx of Chinese players, while Chinese players made threatening comments about their country taking Taiwan by force. Perceiving such conflicts as a potential threat to profitability, the Taiwanese WoW operating company enacted censorship rules, banned the use of certain terms and labels on public channels, and tightly managed competition for resources.

Some conflicts were clearly tied to game culture differences associated with national background. One example entails the dungeon team practice of collecting dropped equipment after killing a boss. In the past, the default option among Taiwanese players was ‘Greed’, meaning, ‘I would like to have that piece of equipment if no one needs it’; this is perceived as a gesture of courtesy. However, the Chinese default is ‘Need’, which gives the player a higher priority. When this cultural practice brought about constant conflicts and finally manifested as a confrontation between ‘Taiwan identity’ versus ‘China identity’, the informal ‘need-before-greed’ practice underwent a significant adjustment in later game releases. In the past, Taiwanese players have long been bound by unofficial rules of etiquette to release claims to pieces of armor that they don’t really need, a practice, now it became a game system rule. Another change was enacted to confirm that each player’s roll occurs independently from those executed by others, meaning that other players’ loot is not affected. This change had an immediate effect in terms of reducing hostilities between Chinese and Taiwanese players over resource competition.

Both examples show how virtual world mechanisms and player interactions can be regulated by machine architectures and code—even though players possess certain levels of autonomy, they must adapt to rules embedded in game systems. What is alarming is that players’ feelings toward the other group are not directed against the other ‘player’

group, but rather against the other ethnic/national group. One Taiwanese player put it this way. ‘Chinese are uncivilised! I know that from playing with them in games!’ Players are for the most part unaware of the fact that game design could change the way they feel about different groups of people, but over many years of gaming research we have seen multiple examples of relationship modifications and ‘corrections’ involving simple changes in gaming mechanisms.

For mobile games, we discuss two techno-governance practices here that are linked to revenue generation. One entails interfering with a player’s game flow—for example, requiring the addition of ‘game lives’ or ‘health points’ in order to continue a game session. The player must use real-world currency to purchase lives or points, or ask a friend on a social media site to support a life so that play can be resumed. For the game company the motivation is to get friends and family members involved in game activities so that they become new game customers; many players view this practice as socially aggressive and annoying. This ‘pay-or-stop-the-activity’ technique is found in many other business models, but it is especially effective in mobile games due to the fun-driven nature of gameplay.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, another technological intervention frequently found in mobile games is the use of AI-controlled characters. One consequence, especially in multiplayer (eg, 5 vs 5) battle arena mobile games, involves the ways that game companies respond to player tendencies to leave a gaming session before a sufficient number of teammates and/or opponents have made a commitment to play. To reduce the potential for players to abandon their playing sessions, game companies are increasingly using AI-controlled characters (in the form of bots with no conversational capabilities) as fill-ins. Impacts are considered negligible when the number of bots is small, but when many of them appear at the same time it can draw player attention, possibly resulting in questions such as ‘Who am I playing with now?’ ‘Are they real?’ and ‘Should I talk to them?’ MMOG players have long been accustomed to using

2 Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, ‘A Chinese cyber diaspora: Contact and identity negotiation in a game world’ in Alexis Pulos and S. Austin Lee (eds), *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class and Colonialism in Play: Video Games in East Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016) 179-209

bots to automatically gather in-game resources; however, when an excessive number of bots started to negatively affect social atmospheres, game companies acted to restrict their presence. As AI becomes increasingly sophisticated, no doubt there will be many new questions regarding its function in gameplay.

### III. Conclusion

To consider ways that leisure technology is shaping 'who to play with' and 'how to play' issues, we analysed three aspects of techno-governance practices in games: 'setting game world digital boundaries', 'building player interaction environments', and 'creating objects for player interactions'. From the cases discussed in this essay, our conclusion is

that players are capable of resisting some forms of game company techno-governance, but for the most part they are restricted to reacting and responding to game company decisions, with subtle changes embedded in game code and largely invisible to players. Therefore, in most cases individual players follow paths with the fewest gameplay obstacles, and remain unaware of subtle social behaviour realignments.

Whether intentionally or not, game companies are the most important decision makers in international game world foreign relations, perhaps even affecting real-world relations involving players from different countries or world regions. Of course, many adjustments and policies enacted by game companies are motivated by commercial gain, sometimes at the risk of damaging player senses of immersion or of violating unwritten rules of social trust.