

THE “ACHIEVEMENT CULTURE”: GAMING AS WORK IN *DIABLO III*

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Abstract: *The dynamics involved in the development of Role Playing Games (i.e. RPGs) were previously associated in digital anthropology with the economic goals of the developers and producers (Rettberg, 2007, p. 24). In this article, I reconsider the attraction that Diablo III is meant to engender among players. I also review the features that transform this game from an entertainment platform into a simulacrum that entails countless hours of repetitive work. I conclude that Diablo III represents an elaborate metaphor of achievement through work.*

Key words: *digital anthropology, digital culture, achievement system, webs of significance.*

1. Introduction

The dynamics involved in the development of *Role Playing Games* (i.e. RPGs) were previously associated in digital anthropology with the economic goals of digital games developers and producers (Rettberg, 2007, p. 24). In this article, I reconsider from a cultural standpoint the attraction that *Diablo III* is meant to engender among players. Blizzard offers players the illusion of becoming successful in ways similar to those promoted in Western cultures. One of the results of this attraction is the provision of a source of steady income for game developers. This became particularly apparent after *Blizzard* had introduced seasons to the game in the patch 2.1. Each season lasts for approximately three months and is comparable to the ladder system from *Diablo II*. Overall, the game developers' purpose is to introduce players into a world in which they stay as long as possible, without being distracted by other virtual worlds.

The economic goals of game developers generally determine the way players engage with computer games. As a result, games “are primarily entertainment products, not forms of art” (Rettberg, 2007, p. 20). *Diablo III* was developed by *Blizzard* with a specific idea of how to extract money from players and to encourage the development of a dedicated community. In turn, the *Diablo III* community provides a reliable source of income for the game's producers.

As the business models of computer games have changed, the nature of reward systems grew in complexity in order to further motivate players. Unlike the first role-playing games, in *Diablo III* the quantifiable dimension of a player's achievements includes several measurements that define his/her avatar: agility, armour, dexterity, intelligence, power, mana, stamina etc. Furthermore, the completion of complex, often repetitive and time-

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consuming actions is rewarded through a specific system of achievements. These achievements are similar to those associated with the ‘status-role complex’ from real societies. In this article, I present an excursus regarding the cultural dimensions of gaming transformed into work, as it is represented in the achievement system from *Diablo III*.

2. Objectives

Blizzard’s development of the achievement system from *Diablo III* mirrors to a great extent the accomplishments of *World of Warcraft*. While those that regularly played the other two games from the *Diablo* franchise found many similarities between it and its’ predecessors, the level of complexity of *Diablo III’s* achievement system was considerably higher. Internalizing the majority of this system was a challenge for me, even though I had experience with other RPGs, both as a gamer and as a researcher. By carrying out participant observation, I was able to uncover many interesting features created by the game developers and adapted by the gamer community. Consequently, understanding these features necessitated not only an experimental approach, but also an interpretive one, in accordance with the theses postulated by Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 5).

Players’ interaction on *Battle.net* servers contributes to *Diablo III’s* appeal and complexity. The players can explore the world of *Sanctuary*, partake into various activities and choose from a determined set of mostly linear and often repetitive quests, which have a varying degree of complexity. Interestingly, some of these quests are not apparently connected with the main story of the game. However, their completion is confined within each of the game’s five acts. All these elements allow a high degree of personalization. Thus, every player’s avatar is unique. This degree of personalization allows players the possibility to create “a second self, with traits and physical qualities far different from his or her own real embodied personality” (Rettberg, 2007, p. 23). This is a chance for many players to escape the limitations of their own situation in the real world. In addition, the allure of having a new beginning, albeit a digital one, offers a greater degree of flexibility of choice. This is a decisive factor in the development of a ‘gaming’ attraction and even ‘addiction’. Players replace the reality of their lives with a surrogate, an illusion based on ephemeral achievements. That is why my first objective is to reconsider from a cultural standpoint the attraction that *Diablo III* is meant to engender among players. This attraction is maintained by *Blizzard* by continuously revising the game.

Assessing the achievement system from *Diablo III* entails both an anthropological and a semiotic approach. In this article, I argue that this system was developed by *Blizzard* in order to compel players to spend large amounts of time playing *Diablo III*. Accordingly, my second objective is to review the features that transform this game from a site of play and entertainment into a work platform (Yee, 2006, p. 68). I emphasize the fact that completing some of the more difficult achievements requires many hours of tedious work.

3. *Diablo III* as a digital culture of achievement

Any digital culture shares many similarities with ‘real’ cultures. It is constructed, defined and represented according to norms, customs and traditions. Furthermore, it entails ‘webs of significance’ whose meaning could be interpreted using Geertz’s theses (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Accordingly, the dichotomy between work and play should be also valid in digital cultures. To a certain extent this was true. However, as Nick Yee has

emphasized a decade ago “the staggering amount of work that’s being done in these games is often gone unnoticed [*sic!*]” (Yee, 2006, p. 68). The blur between work and play in Blizzard’s *Diablo III* has been influenced by the achievement system developed by Blizzard for *World of Warcraft*.

The achievement system from *Diablo III* includes multiple quantifiable dimensions determined by a plethora of metrics. Many achievements entail repetitive actions and multiple cultural references. The player’s avatar has an overall level between one and seventy. Additionally, there is a paragon system combined into an account wide level that has no maximum. This system was introduced in the patch 2.0.1 deployed on 24th of February 2014, one month before the release of the expansion pack *Reaper of Souls*. It allows players to change between multiple avatars and retain the paragon bonuses.

The player can choose one of the six classes of avatars or ‘heroes’: (i) barbarian, (ii) crusader, (iii) demon hunter, (iv) monk, (v) witch doctor and (vi) wizard. Also, each player has the possibility to choose not only his/her avatar’s class, but also its type:

(A) *Normal* or *softcore* avatars have no advantage to obtaining superior items and no experience bonuses, but can respawn upon death.

(B) *Hard-core* avatars have a bonus chance to obtain superior items. They also have an intrinsic experience bonus. However, hard-core avatars cannot be resurrected; they become unplayable if they are killed. They have a distinct ranking system and can form teams exclusively with avatars of the same type.

(C) *Seasonal* avatars are created at the beginning of each season. Their performance is compared on a specific leader board for various levels of difficulty and/or regions. Seasonal avatars have access to exclusive legendary items awarded for good performance. There are also *Conquests*, which are basically seasonal achievements. Usually, the first 1000 players to complete the *Conquests* gain this type of achievements. Seasonal avatars are transferred to the main account of the players.

Attributes such as agility, armour, dexterity, intelligence, power, mana and stamina define each player’s avatars quantitatively. Firstly, these metrics are determined by the avatar’s class and by the level the player has reached. Secondly, the player’s armour, melee attack, ranged attack abilities, resistances, speed, health and energy regeneration are also influenced by: (a) wearable items type and rarity; (b) class-specific items; (c) multiple crafting, enchanting and transmogrifying options for items; (d) temporary buffs (e.g. *Nephalem Glory*). Thirdly, each player’s reputation is determined quantitatively according to a plethora of achievements that are locked to each account and character. These achievements are grouped on multiple categories, as it can be seen in Figure 1. Every player’s achievements and reputation are also determined by *Blizzard’s Battle.net* ranking system. Furthermore, the player’s performance could be assessed subjectively by fellow members of the *Battle.net* clans.

To complicate things even further, *Diablo III* had a double difficulty system: (I) a system comprising four modes of difficulty (i.e. *Normal*, *Nightmare*, *Hell* and *Inferno*); (II) the monster power system with ten levels of difficulty. Higher difficulties have exclusive item rewards: superior gems and items, supplementary gold and bonus experience points. In the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack this was transformed into a dynamic difficulty system in which the monsters and the avatar’s levels are correlated. The selected difficulty affects the dynamic correlation by further increasing the toughness of the various types of monsters. The difficulties that can be chosen in *Reaper of Souls* are: (1) *Normal*; (2) *Hard*; (3) *Expert*; (4) *Master*; (5) *Torment I*; (6) *Torment II*; (7) *Torment III*; (8) *Torment IV*.



Fig. 1. *The Diablo III in-game achievement interface*

All these features could be considered ‘webs of significance’ of the *Diablo III* digital culture. In reflecting upon the transformation of gaming into work, I think it is worth to contemplate the “inversion of the formula of participant observation to that of an *observant participation*” (Alemán, 2012, p. 154). Envisaged in digital anthropology by Stephanie W. Alemán, this idea suggests that concepts such as reflexivity are prerequisites for developing research that acknowledges the anthropologist’s subjectivity and agency, especially in studying a digital culture. Thus, the repositioned anthropologist is better able to approach issues such as the transformation of gaming into work. In my experience, this meant spending more than 1000 hours in *Diablo III* over the past three years. I have pondered upon the appeal of projecting myself into an avatar on a regular basis. Indeed, taking the form of an avatar represents an ephemeral means of overcoming the shortfalls of the ‘real’ life. During my gaming sessions I was able to interact in novel ways, beyond the limits encountered in real life. The development of my avatar in a gothic styled world allowed me to develop a sense of enjoyment and fulfilment in ways that were completely different from those encountered in the real world.

4. Labour and economy in *Diablo III*

My review of the features that transform *Diablo III* from a site of play and entertainment into a work platform would not be complete without several remarks regarding the game’s ‘economy’. The in-game economy is also inspired from *World of Warcraft*. The work I had to perform in each quest and dungeon brought me its rewards or ‘loot’. Almost all the monsters ‘grinded’² in the hack-and-slash style of *Diablo III* drop items, raw materials and gold coins. I was able to use the gold in order to purchase weapons, armour, gems, rings,

² ‘Grinding’ represents the practice of killing one enemy after another, in order to gain loot or experience (Bainbridge, 2010, p. 142).

amulets, dyes and gems. While in-game, I had the option either to sell or purchase items from various merchants. Furthermore, the items from my demon hunter's equipment could be repaired, crafted, enchanted, socketed and transmogrified. All these services are performed in *Diablo III* by a special kind of merchant NPCs called artisans. Every artisan's skill can be levelled up with money and specific recipes. After releasing the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack there are three artisans:

- (1) The blacksmith Haedrig Eamon is specialized in crafting and repairing weapons and armour. He can also salvage crafting materials from unwanted items. This NPC is first encountered in the first act of the game.
- (2) The jeweller Covetous Shen is able to construct rings and amulets and he can also combine lesser gems into more powerful ones. In addition, Shen can remove gems from socketed items. He is initially found in the second act.
- (3) The mystic Myriam Jahzia is an expert in enchanting items, which allowed me to change some of their magical properties. The mystic can also alter the appearance of weapons and armour for a certain fee, a process called transmogrification. In order to gain her services it is necessary to buy the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack.

Initially, there was also an auction house connected with the *Battle.net*. It allowed players to sell and buy weapons and armour for gold or real money. The other games from the *Diablo* franchise did not include this feature. However, *World of Warcraft* does include an auction house. In *Diablo III* it is subdivided in two: (α) in the *Gold-based Auction House*, all the transactions for items, crafting materials and avatars are conducted using the game's currency (i.e. 'gold'); (β) in the *Real Money Transaction Auction House* the items are transacted for real-world money (i.e. euro, dollars, pounds etc.). The advantage of the auction house was that every player was able to put his/her items for sale in an automated system. Thus, in the auction house it wasn't necessary for a player to be present in order to sell items or advertise his/her merchandise. The auction house also had the advantage of easy access: it was available at any time, from multiple locations, including a *Battle.net* button. It was separated between *normal* (i.e. *softcore*) and *hard-core* avatars. However, it was closed on the 18th of March 2014 because it hindered the gameplay.

After the release of the *Reaper of Souls* expansion pack Blizzard introduced an alternate currency in the *Adventure Mode* of the game: the *Blood Shards*. In itself, this mode has expanded the game with multiple features, bounties and exclusive zones. *Blood Shards* represent an alternate currency that drops from: (a) *Horadric Caches*³; (b) *Rift Guardians*⁴. *Blood Shards* can be used exclusively for gambling items from Kadala. She is the only merchant that provides gambling services in the *Adventure Mode*. Initially, each player could only possess 500 *Blood Shards*. However, the developers changed the game dynamics in the patch 2.2.0. Each rank of *Greater Rift*⁵ beaten consecutively in single player mode increases this level by 10. Thus, players are encouraged to perform a series of repetitive labours in a manner that is similar to Taylorism. Just like in *World of Warcraft*, in *Diablo III* "there is an assembly-line mentality to many of the quests, many of which involve killing a staggering number of a certain type of beast or enemy (i.e. grinding), over and over again" (Rettberg, 2007, 30). Accordingly, I agree with Rettberg's thesis that

³ A *Horadric Cash* is a type of item awarded to players after completing the five bounties from an act.

⁴ The *Rift Guardians* are boss monsters found in *Nephalem Rifts*. They are found in alternate realities to the mortal world, similar to dungeons, but with a higher difficulty level.

⁵ *Greater Rifts* are alternate realities to *Sanctuary* (i.e. the mortal realm), where players test their capabilities beyond the *Torment IV* level of difficulty.

combat “is a form of production” (Rettberg, 2007, 31). Through combat every avatar of one’s account generates experience, gold and a quantifiable measure of reputation on *Battle.net*.

In a hack-and-slash game like *Diablo III* production and development takes the form of killing. However, ‘death’ in-game has a different significance in comparison with ‘death’ in the real world. The monsters killed in *Diablo III* are respawned each time a player enters the game. The player kills the monster, takes loot from the corpse and in the next instance of the game, the monster is back. This mechanics is somewhat slower than the one encountered in *World of Warcraft*. However, it can still be argued that it works “more like agriculture than war” (Rettberg, 2007, 37).

5. Conclusions

In an ironic twist, while video games like *Diablo III* were purportedly designed for our entertainment, they compel players to engage in repetitive quests for countless hours. In other words, they compel them to work. In the last two decades the blur between work and play was addressed in several texts in cultural anthropology. For example, Yee addressed the transformation of games from “sites of play and entertainment” into “work platforms” (Yee, 2006, p. 68). Subsequently, Rettberg developed Yee’s theses. He also associated the transformation of entertainment into work in *World of Warcraft* with the “detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist societies” entailed by the game (Rettberg, 2007, p. 20).

I assert that *Diablo III* benefited to a large extent from the lessons that its creators from *Blizzard* had learned in the past, while developing *World of Warcraft*. Furthermore, the developers expounded a high degree of flexibility in addressing some of *Diablo III*’s potential problems, like its *Auction House*. *Blizzard* has also developed and constantly upgraded an achievement system that includes multiple references to real cultural traits. The fact that each achievement is accounted in the *Battle.net* ranking system represents an additional incentive. The achievement system’s quantifiable metrics determine players to frequently engage in repetitive quests in order to obtain an ephemeral sense of enjoyment and fulfilment. Ultimately, the realm of *Diablo III* remains an elaborate cultural metaphor that distracts players from the true nature of work that is being performed.

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