Playful Participatory Culture: Learning from Reddit

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Abstract

This project considers how we might understand participatory culture platforms such as Reddit through the lens of game studies. Using ethnographic techniques and approaches from actor-network theory, this research describes several playful patterns of interaction seen commonly on Reddit, and discusses the ways in which certain design choices enable and constrain the kind of play that occurs. I argue that understanding these spaces as games provides a deeper understanding of the interactions between participants and the culture of Reddit at large. It can also help us explore how individuals assign meaning to things like "karma points" and engage in reflexive talk about the rewards and rules governing play. At the same time, this research suggests the "game" of Reddit is not unproblematic, as who can play, how they can play, and what play looks like often reinscribes many hegemonic tendencies of (internet) culture more broadly.

Keywords

participatory culture; reddit; play; game studies; actor-network theory

Introduction

Participatory culture platforms such as Reddit offer the ability for us to connect through making (Gauntlett, 2011) and encourage active participation in/with the media in ways that are potentially democratizing (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). At the same time, the political-economic realities of participatory culture mean that corporations providing the distribution channels and platforms profit far more often than content creators do (Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Terranova, 2003). Sometimes lost in the debate is that fans and individuals engage in this kind of labor precisely because it is "fun," and because it connects them to a community of like-minded individuals. In many ways, the motivations for creating and sharing content in these spaces are similar to the motivations for playing games.

Game studies scholars have discussed content created by gamers (Consalvo, 2003; Duncan, 2011; Milner, 2009; Postigo, 2010), but little work has been done to apply theory and concepts from game studies to participatory culture platforms specifically. That is, we have yet to understand how individual interactions in spaces such as Reddit might themselves be understood as part of a game, where a kind of permeable "magic circle" (Moore, 2011; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) shapes behavior, and where things such as "karma points" have a similarly important, endogenous meaning (Costikyan, 2002) for Reddit members as "XP" or achievements might have for *World of Warcraft* players. This paper poses the following question: How can we understand participatory culture on platforms such as Reddit through the lens of "play" and game studies?[1]

Method

This research is part of an ongoing ethnographic study of Reddit. My goal is to describe how play manifests itself on the site and to understand how the culture of Reddit connects to larger sociocultural structures. I have spent over a year observing and participating on Reddit as member of the

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[1] In this case, I am not interested in the ways we could gamify participatory culture platforms to enhance their "stickiness," (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011) but in illustrating how play already occurs in these spaces.

community, as well as interviewing Reddit members about their experiences. Guiding my approach is Latour's (2007) notion of "following the actor" to unpack the connections between individuals and technologies.

Reddit as a game and carnival

Reddit.com enables the sharing of original and reposted content from around the web. The site is comprised of multiple subreddits devoted to a topic of interest (such as r/atheism or r/politics), which can be created by any Reddit member. Upvotes are measured in karma points, and signal to the community that a particular comment or post is substantive and adds to the larger conversation.[2] When content is downvoted, the poster's account loses karma points. Presumably the "game" of Reddit is to accrue as much positive karma as possible by submitting appropriate, interesting original content and engaging in the community's conversation.

Like more traditional games, karma points have only endogenous meaning (Costikyan, 2002), and yet posters often engage in reflexive talk about them (e.g. noting that their most upvoted comment is a story about their cat). An account with a higher amount of karma also gains a kind of Reddit notoriety, whereby later comments and posts acquire more attention and karma points, creating a kind of power law effect (Shirky, 2003). Frequent, off-topic posting is not typically rewarded, but moments of clever Dadaist play and *non sequiturs* are often upvoted and commented upon. The rules of this game are taken seriously, while also shrugged off as inconsequential by the community. This is evidenced by almost daily discussions around what constitutes "karmawhoring" (reposting content or commentary solely for upvotes) and the implication that somehow this is "against the rules" of Reddit.

While Reddit consists of many different moderated subreddits, all of which have their own explicit and implicit rules around the kind of content they accept and the interactions they encourage/allow, the idea of "carnival" is a productive lens for understanding site interactions. In Mikhail Bahktin's (1984) formulation, carnival represents an upending of the trappings of everyday life. Hierarchies are ameliorated and reversed, and the crowd takes pleasure in the "grotesque body," reveling in the pleasures (and degradation) of the flesh. On Reddit, this means that a single thread may contain sexual references, animated GIF responses, puns, grotesque images and stories, racist and sexist speech, juxtaposed with sincere commentary and meaningful dialogue. All of this contributes to a chaotic space that is at times both compelling and repulsive.

Patterns of play

Despite the seemingly chaotic nature of Reddit's "carnival," my research suggests a number of patterns characterize play on the site, two of which are described briefly below.

Memes

The most common form of play involves the posting of memes, often in the form of pictures, animated GIFS, videos, or modified LOLcats. Often, popular memes are remixed with other content appearing at the same time on the site (usually especially humorous, gross, or outrageous material). For example, two popular memes – a recipe for "2 AM chili" (Figure 1) and instructions for creating a shower using frozen soap and water (Figure 2) – appeared in August 2011. Later, these were mashed up into the playful 2AM ice-chili shower (Figure 3) meme. References to these memes still appear occasionally, suggesting they are cultural touch-points for the community.

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[2] According to "Reddiquette," the community's informal, self-authored guide to interacting with others on the site (http://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette).

Figure 1: 2 AM Chili meme (cropped) - http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/jkc1j/2am_chili/

Sometimes my friends and I like to play sports and then hang out afterwards, but I feel uncomfortable the whole time because I'm drenched in sweat. So I came up with an idea for bringing a refreshing shower with me wherever I go.

THE SUPPLIES

All you need for your portable shower are an empty container (usually I use a dip or cream cheese size plastic tub), a bottle of shower gel, and water.

STEP ONE

Fill the container up a third of the way with water and squeeze out a couple squirts of body wash.

STEP TWO

Stir that bitch up.

STEP THREE

Stick the container in the freezer until the contents are frozen. (Optional Step Three-and-a-Half: thaw some meat and eat it while you wait)

Figure 2: Shower to Go (cropped) - http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/jinex/shower_to_go/

Figure 3: 2 AM Ice Chili Shower (http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/jlbdf/2_am_ice_chili_shower/)

Novelty accounts and bots

Reddit is a persistent, pseudo-anonymous space; individuals build reputations based on their submissions and comments over time, but they may maintain multiple accounts that remain unconnected to each other (Donath, 1999). Given the large number of possible accounts present on the site, the low barrier to entry for registration, and the interest in creating a unique, memorable

username, many Reddit threads are populated by novelty accounts. These accounts often post drawings, stories, or other responses that reflect the account's username. For example, "ICanLegoThat" responds to posts with pictures of Lego scenes he/she has created. "DiscussionQuestions" responds to postings in the style of discussion questions one might hear in a high school English course. Automated scripts (called "bots") also populate the site – some of which offer helpful information such as transcribing the text on visual memes in case the hosting site is unavailable, and others such as "haiku_robot" that playfully respond to particular comments (in this case, automatically reposting any comment that fits the standard 5-7-5 syllable haiku structure).

Implications

My work suggests that using concepts from game studies as a lens for understanding interactions on participatory culture platforms like Reddit can provide a richer description of play in these spaces. It can also help us explore how individuals assign meaning to things like karma and engage in reflexive talk about the rewards and rules governing play. At the same time, this research suggests the "game" of Reddit is not unproblematic, as who can play, how they can play, and what play looks like often reinscribes many hegemonic tendencies of (internet) culture more broadly.

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