

The Role of the Everyday User in the Evolution of MMORPGs

Traditionally, there have been two schools of thought in regards to the manner in which the social world interfaces with the technological. One field, sometimes referred to as technological determinism, has been heavily influenced by McLuhan and Innis from the Toronto School of Communication. Determinism projects a profound significance in the way technologies influence societies. One of the main critiques of determinism is that it subverts the role of human agency to that of technologies. It “focuses our minds on how to *adapt* to technological change, not on how to *shape* it” (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999). This deficiency is addressed in the social constructivism model. One theory has been particularly influential in the development of constructivism: The social construction of technology (SCOT). SCOT, developed by Bijker and Pinch (1987), postulates that relevant social groups will have different problems associated with a particular technological artifact. Due to the interpretive flexibility of an artifact, these social groups will be able to create varying solutions to these problems, and infuse the technology with different meanings. Ultimately, certain interpretations or solutions will become more widely accepted than others, and the shape of the artifact will stabilize.

Winner (1993) points out a number of deficiencies with SCOT, including its failure to consider the social consequences of technical choices; its marginalization of “irrelevant” social groups; and its neglect of more underlying social dynamics that may influence the development process. Bakardjieva uses Winner’s critique of SCOT to aid in the development of her theory of everyday users. According to her, SCOT can not include the ordinary user as a relevant social group because of their dispersed state of existence. In a *Critical Theory of Technology*, Feenberg (1991) addresses many of Winner’s PE concerns with SCOT by proposing an approach called critical constructivism. In critical constructivism, dominant groups fuse their interests into the development of technologies with the end goal of “sedimenting values and interests in rules and procedures, devices and artifacts, that routinize the pursuit of power and advantage by a dominant hegemony.” Concurrently, the force of “subversive rationalization” seeks to undermine the dominant hegemony and force it to recognize the voice of the subordinate groups in society. It is within the context of critical constructivism that we can understand the significance of Bakardjieva’s (2005) quote on the role of the ordinary user.

In *Internet Society*, Bakardjieva (2005) states, “the inventions of functions and meaning on the part of ordinary users is particularly vibrant at the early stage of the social shaping of a new

technology and communication medium. Later in the process, the influence of dominant commercial and political interests will dictate the eventual shape of a technology.” Bakardjieva goes on to state, “alternative possibilities initially evolved by users die out if they do not fit the dominant mould.” This essay will critically examine Bakardjieva’s claims about the role of ordinary users in the shaping of ICTs, focusing on the development of Multi-user Domains (MUDs) and Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs).

Two points need to be addressed beforehand: First, the “ordinary user” is a central element in this discussion. “Ordinary users” will be referred to in accordance with Bakardjieva’s definition, which describes the “ordinary user” as an actor who is “not involved as a professional (engineer, programmer, designer, etc.) or decision-maker in the industrial, commercial or service sectors developing computer-networking technology.” Secondly, the concept of innovation needs to be explained. Bakardjieva refers to the “inventions of functions and meanings.” This essay will use Haddon’s (2005) framework of user innovations to aid in defining the scope of innovation. This framework includes four levels of innovation: users designing and redesigning ICTs; users developing new practices around the usage of ICTs; the more widespread “emergence of creative design and content”; and “the emergence of new patterns of use or new practices within the wider public or subgroups of it.”

Furthermore, it should be noted that Bakardjieva’s overall theory on the role of the user in the shaping process is more complex than what is indicated in the quote. This essay is a critical examination of the noted statement, not a critique of her general theory, which incorporates elements of Feenberg’s theory on critical constructivism with elements of linguistics and semiotics. A more comprehensive study of her statement would consider how it relates to her overall theoretical framework.

The Internet

The Internet is a prime medium for analyzing the innovative role of the ordinary user. There is a precedence of innovation that has been woven into the fabric of the medium. According to Castells (2001), the Internet “highlights people’s capacity to transcend institutional goals, overcome bureaucratic barriers, and subvert established values.” Its roots in the government-funded Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), and connection with the private sector might be construed as setting a tone of top-down innovation and implementation, if not for two

key points: First, the goal of ARPAnet was to develop a network for communications that was decentralized and open-ended, key characteristics that allowed ordinary users to experiment with the medium. Secondly, many of the forces that helped shape the Internet stem from a culture of openness and creativity that pervaded the college campuses where ARPAnet was developed. It was this culture, manifest in policies such as the open-source movement, which has been attributed for the rapid development of the Internet.

Multi-user Domains (MUDS)

In the late 70s, two students at Essex University collaborated on a project that sought to leverage the Internet as a platform for text-based role-playing. Working on a DECsystem-10 mainframe, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle constructed the world's first MUD, often referred to as MUD1. Initially, the game was only accessible by students at Essex University. As word spread, users began dialing-in to the MUD using modems. The first MUD was heavily influenced by the role playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. In the MUD, users would explore virtual landscapes and engage in combat with other users and programmed "monsters." In the SCOT model, Bartle and Trubshaw could be considered a social group, proposing an interpretation of a multi-user online role-playing game, on the emptiness of cyberspace.

MUD1 grew in popularity to the point where users began encountering technological barriers, most notably limited bandwidth. In response, many users began to code their own MUDs, using MUD1 as a guiding model. In just a short time, hundreds of MUDs had sprung up throughout Europe and North America. The online buzz surrounding MUDs began leaking into the mainstream, and it was not long until they began to gain exposure in hobbyist and special-interest magazines. By 1984, Bartle and Trubshaw realized they had collaboratively developed a potentially profitable technology, and formed MUSE Ltd. in an attempt to capitalize on it. They rewrote the software, naming it MUD2, and ran it on 32-bit computers owned by Network Information Services (NIS) a division of BT. Despite the incredible success of MUD1, MUD2 failed to be a lucrative undertaking, as did numerous other commercial ventures involving MUDs. The "dominant commercial" interests never had a substantial impact on the shape of the technology; rather, the ordinary user continued to dictate the shaping process as we shall see in the following example.

The initial MUDs were limiting in terms of what the user could or could not do within the virtual world. In most cases, a user could interact with pre-coded objects and locations, but these objects and locations themselves were not editable. According to Bakardjieva's statement on the role of the ordinary user, the vibrancy observed during the formative stages of the technologies development would be expected to wane as dominant commercial interests took hold. Although there were continued commercial ventures into MUDs, the most successful MUDs were largely non-commercial endeavors coded by ordinary users. Furthermore, many of the subsequent iterations proved to be more innovative than the original MUDs. For instance, Tiny-MUD, developed by Jim Aspnes at Carnegie Mellon University, provided users with the ability to code and create new objects and landscapes within the MUD (Pargman, 2000). Tiny-MUD was not only innovative in its design, but also in the new social practices it inspired. Whereas user activity in previous MUDs had been primarily restricted to exploring landscapes and combating monsters, the central activity in Tiny-MUD involved social interactions between various users. In both these capacities, Tiny-MUD's model had a profound effect on the shape of future MUDs.

Throughout the 1990s, the number of user-run MUDs increased dramatically. According to Pargman (2000), there were between 1500 – 3000 publicly available MUDs by the year 2000. The majority of successful MUDs continued to be managed and developed by communities of ordinary users. Throughout the lifespan of MUDs, the dominant commercial interests that would be expected according to Bakardjieva, never appeared. It proved to be a similar and related ICT, where dominant forces would begin to have an impact.

Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs)

Although MUDs largely resisted commercialization, they certainly influenced commercial game developers. Throughout the 90s, a variety of software production companies began developing single-player fantasy role-playing games that were thematically similar to MUDs. The fundamental difference was the integration of graphical user interfaces (GUIs). The GUI may have been responsible for the widespread popularity of this new generation of role-playing games. Titles included notables like Final Fantasy, Ultima, and the Legend of Zelda. During this same time period, there were a number of commercial attempts to place role-playing games online. It was not until the mid to late-90s when the online role-playing game began to achieve a degree of popularity. Today, MMORPGs have become a tremendously lucrative,

commercially dominated industry. According to some estimates (Dawson, 2006), the online gaming industry is expected to grow at an annual rate of 95% throughout the next five years, leading a videogame industry that is expected to be valued at over \$65 billion by the year 2011. According to Edward Castronova, an economist at California State University Fullerton and one of the foremost academics focusing on online gaming, the sum of all virtual goods sold through Internet auctions in the MMORPG *EverQuest* would account for the 77th largest economy in the world.

If MMORPGs and MUDs are to be viewed as two manifestations of an encompassing technology, then Bakardjieva's belief on the role of ordinary users might hold true. As MUDs evolved into MMORPG, it could be construed that the "invention of functions and meanings" did eventually fade in vibrancy as the reins of production moved from the ordinary user to the commercial world. In the initial world of MMORPGs, the ordinary user had transformed into a consumer. The commercial world had come to dictate the contours of the MMORPG worlds, as well as the terms of interaction within these spaces.

The sedentary role of the ordinary user in commercially manufactured games was short-lived. It was not long until ordinary users began figuring out ways to crack commercial software and begin "modding," a process in which commercial software is redesigned to suit user preferences. Suddenly, a flurry of modded games, redesigned by users, began appearing throughout the Internet. Initially, commercial manufacturers attempted a variety of tactics to prevent users from modding their games, but eventually found it easier to embrace the practice. One example of this trend can be seen with the computer game *Half-Life*, which was recently re-released by the manufacturer with user-coded mods. Some manufacturers have even begun to release mod packs with software, which provide the user with mapping, scripting, and animation utilities (Brown & Oren, 2005).

With MMORPGs, the ability of the ordinary user to mod was more limited due to technological barriers. In many MMORPGs, the software driving the game resides on a centralized server. Cracking the software would first require finding a way to access the server, which is a much more difficult task. Yet the technological stumbling block did not deter ordinary users in MMORPGs from engaging in innovative practices.

Thematically similar to conventional MUDs, *Diablo II* is a MMORPG in which the user must navigate through various stages of a fantasy world, on their own or with other players. The game is played on a server called Battle.net, which allows players to create new games or join games in progress. The Battle.net platform additionally serves as a real-time chat room for players not actively involved in a game. The main interaction involves navigation through the virtual landscape and combat with non-player monsters. As the player defeated more monsters, they gain “experience points,” which can be used to develop various character skills. Additionally, acquisition of items plays a prominent role in the game: the better items a player has, the stronger their character will become. These activities are what Taylor et al. (2005) refers to as “playing in the box.” They are what has been projected by the game designers while “constructing the user” (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996) and consequently programmed into the game.

According to a critical examination by Taylor et al. (2005), the reality of game play in *Diablo II* reveals a dramatically different picture. Most players in Battle.net complete the various levels of the narrative in a relatively short amount of time. What sustains their game play over a course of months and even years involves the acquisition of items within the game; and trading and acquisition of items in the Battle.net chat room. Players are innovative in the manner in which they develop new practices in *Diablo II*, and establish new patterns of interaction (Haddon, 2005). Each user account is allotted a set number of virtual characters. Additionally, advanced characters are used primarily as a means to increase a player’s overall repository of weapons and equipment while low level characters are used primarily as “mules,” whose primary role is to carry valuable items. Additionally, the practice of “farming” involves the identification and repetitive defeat of certain enemies, who are known to drop high-grade weapons and equipment. Some veteran players with highly developed characters will spend the majority of their time farming for equipment and engaging in virtual commerce in the Battle.net chat room, and even real world commerce through online auction sites like eBay. Ultimately, “in the box” game play becomes an afterthought for most *Diablo II* veterans.

In 2003, a San Francisco-based software company, Linden Lab, launched a new MMORPG called *Second Life*. Unlike many of its predecessors, *Second Life* decided to embrace user innovation by providing its members with the ability to create and manipulate the contours of the virtual landscape. Furthermore, their policy provides “residents” with intellectual actual ownership of the lands they create (Linden Research, 2006). *Second Life* also provides a

virtual “marketplace,” with a currency that can be converted to US dollars at numerous online currency exchanges.

Conclusion

We have examined Barkardjieva’s statement regarding the role of the ordinary user in the shaping process, by studying historical and contemporary examples of online role-playing games. We have shown that contrary to Bakardjieva’s statement, the ordinary user can exhibit innovativeness throughout various stages of the shaping process, and profoundly affect the outcome even after the early stages of the social shaping of a new ICT. We have used very specific case studies to support the argument. A broader range of examples is needed to fully engage the question regarding the role of ordinary users in the shaping process. Furthermore, the examples noted are very specific to the Western world, and entrenched in Western systems and ideals of politics and economy. For a technology with a global reach like MMORPGs, a more international scope of analysis is needed.

According to Silverstone and Haddon (1996), “Design and domestication are two sides of the innovation coin. Domestication is anticipated in design and design is completed in domestication.” In developing *Second Life*, its designers looked to examples of user innovation in more constrained forms of MMORPGs. Their conclusion was that the optimal framework to suit game play was an open-ended one that gave a substantial amount of control and ownership back to the ordinary user. In many ways, *Second Life* symbolizes a journey for the online role-playing game that has come full circle. An important component of the design/domestication interface (Silverstone & Haddon, 2006) is the suggestion that shaping is more of a circular process, whereas Bakardjieva’s statement insinuates more of a linear process. Future work in this area might critically examine the notion of “stabilization” of ICTs in the shaping process.

Finally, an example like *Second Life* encompasses a new array of interpretive challenges. On one hand, *Second Life* can be said to empower users by allowing them to independently develop and claim ownership of their domains. In this light, *Second Life* can be construed as a user-shaped ICT. On the other hand, the underlying framework that facilitates activity by ordinary users is managed and developed by a profit-seeking corporation. Furthermore, the *Second Life* system of ownership and commerce is integrated with offline political and economic systems to an unprecedented level. Further analysis of the implications for this furthered

integration between online and offline is needed to fully understand the role of the ordinary user in the shaping process of this particular ICT.

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