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Not just users: Mapping the range of user roles in open development games projects

Proposal Type: Research Paper

This presentation will describe the range of user roles in video game open development projects. It contributes to research on the intersections between game development and technical communication (e.g., Karabinus & Atherton, 2018; Reimer, 2017; Sherlock, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014) by arguing that open game development expands the boundaries of the roles we imagine for participants in user experience (UX) research.

User roles are the primary motivations and activities of users, which are combined with personalized and demographic details to create fully-developed personas. Recent work has shown that UX practitioners often find user roles more useful than personas (Matthews, Judge, & Whittaker, 2012). A focus on user roles also emphasizes how individual users adopt multiple roles over time (GroupVisual.io, 2017).

Open development is the activity of publicly distributing and iterating on an incomplete video game. Developers have recognized open development as primarily a new communications system that involves discussing the game development with players and facilitating useful feedback from players (Brown, 2015; Spock, 2014). My previous work argued that, by combining content strategy and UX research, open development shows how UX research participation can be designed as an engaging experience (Author, 2018).

Since open development projects are prolonged processes (often lasting 1-2 years), participants are able to adopt a wide variety of roles, including players, UX research participants, QA testers, fans, community advocates, development participants, and learners. Most participants operate primarily as consumers/end-users focused on using the technology for their own goals (in this case gameplay) and only indirectly or passively participate in the open development feedback system. However, many players also actively provide experience feedback to the developers through forums, social media, or in-game widgets. Some participants act intentionally as quality-assurance testers, even to the point of mimicking industry practices for bug replication and reporting. Other participants act primarily in a fandom role, following news about the developer and game and creating fan art. Some participants also choose to act as developer advocates by enforcing community communication rules or by amplifying developer goals and communications. Finally, other participants are primarily motivated by an interest in game development. They contribute to the open development project by completing developer-created tool tutorials and contributing real content to the final game.

These categorizations have been identified through ongoing research into video game player community communications and open game development systems (Author, 2018). The final presentation will construct full definitions of the roles described above while offering evidence and examples drawn both from player communications and developers' descriptions of projects.

The paper will also act as the foundation for a future comparative content analysis work that will examine the prevalence of the various roles and the specific strategies used by developers to facilitate and support these roles.

Ultimately, the presentation will encourage attendees to consider how extended user-experience projects might be designed to encourage different kinds of participation.

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