Multiplayer Games as Moral Economies: Valuing Treacherous Play in Survivor

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INTRODUCTION

In this extended abstract I propose that a useful way to understand player behaviour is through studying the way that different types of play are given different values by players, that is, by studying their *moral economies*. Valuing certain play acts, styles, strategies and events over other instances of play is intrinsic to the function of competitive multiplayer games. It is through valuing play that win conditions are established or can be met, and players can create goals. Paper beats rock; longest road; you sunk my battle ship.

The most common way in which a play's value is established is through formal rules. Passing a ball through goal posts in soccer awards points, outside the goal posts does not. The team with the highest number of points by the conclusion of the match wins. The moral economy of play that consequently emerges from these rules values passing the ball between the posts higher than not doing so. A strategy that attempts to pass the ball between the goal is valued higher than not doing so. By ruling against play (making it 'cheating') some rules instantaneously de-values it. Rudimentary stuff – rules are at the forefront of the practice of valuing play and have consequently been given primacy in definitions of, and attempts to understand, games and game play (Stenros 2016).

However formal rules are not the only tool with which play is valued in multiplayer games. Well explored terms and concepts like sportsmanship (see Moeller, Esplin and Conway 2009), fair play, spirit (Carter, Gibbs & Arnold 2015) cheating (Consalvo 2007), griefing (or the Taiwanese 'white-eyed', Lin & Sun 2005) and trolling are attached to play acts, events and strategies to change their worth. Passing the ball out of bounds because a member of the opposing team is injured does not help you win, however, due to the concepts of sportsmanship and fair-play (inextricably linked to Soccer's Western historical context and romanticised notions of medieval chivalry), such play is valued more highly than using that advantage to score goals. Cultural and social contexts challenge and transform the ways in which play is valued; an enthusiastic sliding tackle against a 6 year old child in a back-yard soccer game is generally frowned upon.

Conflict emerges when players of the same multiplayer game value particular plays differently, that is, where there are *competing moral economies*. If we disagree on whether it is okay for me to steal from the bank in *Monopoly* when you go to the bathroom, you will probably call me a cheater and refuse to play. This is despite it not saying in the rules of monopoly that players shouldn't steal from the bank. In order to avoid such conflicts, multiplayer games (particularly competitive ones) are typically highly structured; rules govern (and give different values to) play. Win conditions in particular are nearly always established by rules, most commonly through some variation of a points-based system.

A notable exception to this custom is *Survivor*, a televised multiplayer game in which 16-20 players are marooned on a desert island (along with a camera crew). Every three days, a player is voted out of the game by their competitors, until 2-3 players remain. The winner is not chosen by a set of objective conditions, but by the 'jury'; the 7-10 most recently removed players. Each casts a vote to decide who 'won' that season and deserves the winning prize; $1 million USD and the title of sole survivor.

No strict guidelines are given to jury members, except that they must cast a vote. In the penultimate episode of a season of *Survivor,* each remaining player makes their case for why they should win (why their efforts should be valued higher than their competitors) and the jury asks questions to guide their votes.

I subsequently present an analysis of the mechanisms and strategies involved in valuing play over (or under) other styles of play in Survivor, with a particular focus on treacherous play, as treachery is typically valued poorly in game play (Carter, 2015). In addition to presenting a new conceptualization of what rules "do" in games, this analysis also draws attention to the fact that they are neither the sole nor intrinsically primary manner in which it occurs in multiplayer games. Further, by attending to how play is placed into a hierarchy, I hope to extend existing work beyond its current attention to the demarcation of boundaries. Consideration of the nuanced technical, historical, social and cultural factors that affect the valuation of play is necessary for understanding the moral economy of multiplayer games and how they are negotiated and experienced by different players. Consequently, understanding this process in *Survivor*; a context with high stakes but without heavy regulation will contribute to our understanding of how these factors interrelate.

OPTIONAL BIO
Marcus Carter is Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The Univeristy of Sydney. He has recently co-edited *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, published by The University of Minnesota Press. His research examines player experience in social multiplayer games, including *EVE Online, DayZ, Warhammer 40,000* and *Candy Crush Saga*.

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