Domesticating Technology for Shared Success: Collective Enactments of World of Warcraft

Kristine Ask, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Dragvoll, 7491 Trondheim, Norway, phone: +4773598299, email: kristine.ask@ntnu.no.

Knut H. Sørensen, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Dragvoll, 7491 Trondheim, Norway, phone: +4773591790, email: knut.sorensen@ntnu.no. ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0003-0829-3496.

Abstract

In this paper, we analyse processes of domestication as collective enactments, using online game playing of World of Warcraft as a case. We study how groups of players - guilds - develop practices and sense-making with respect to the technologies they use in their shared endeavours in raids to battle monsters. Previous studies of domestication have mainly focused on single-actor strategies and relatively little attention have been given to the impact of concerns for particular domestication outcomes, for example in competitive situations or with goals related to efficiency. This paper contributes to domestication theory by analysing what we call collective domestication in a performance-oriented setting, to see how domestication may produce compatible outcomes for individuals that need to act together. The paper is based on a one year participant observation and qualitative interviews with players. Three types of players were identified – hardcore, casual and moderate – representing three rationales of play: a high level of performance, social benefits, or a combination of the first two. In the analysis, we compare how these three types of player groups' domesticated the game. A main finding is that collective enactments of technology need extensive managerial efforts unless the group share a coherent and uncontested rationale for playing, thus being a moral community.

Author biographies

Kristine Ask has a PhD in Science and Technology Studies and works as Associate Professor at Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Her main research interest is the study of digital games and of the use of social media, including gender issues and on-line harassment.

Her most recent publication is "The Value of Calculations: The Coproduction of Theorycraft and Player Practices" (*Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society*, 2017). [email: Kristine.ask@ntnu.no].

Knut H. Sørensen is Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology. His main research interests include domestication theory, sustainable energy, climate change, responsible research and innovation, and gender, science and technology. Recent publications include *Technologies of Inclusion. Gender in the Information Society* (with Wendy Faulkner and Els Rommes, 2011), *Consumer, client or citizen? How Norwegian local governments domesticate website technology and configure their users* (with Lucia Liste, 2015), and *Mismatch or misunderstanding? Calculation and qualculation among economists and consumers in their framings of the electricity market* (with Margrethe Aune and Åsne Godbolt, 2016).

Introduction

This is a paper about human-technology relationships between players, player communities and the online computer game *World of Warcraft* (WoW, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Using domestication theory (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Sørensen, 2006) to analyse three types of player communities in WoW, the paper addresses technology appropriation as a collective effort. Our aim is to contribute to the further development of domestication theory by addressing two topics; 1) how to understand domestication as a collective effort, and 2) how the outcomes of domestication shape the domestication process.

Previous studies of domestication of technology have mainly focused on single-actor strategies, also when examining organisations or households (e.g., Lie & Sørensen, 1996; Berker, Hartmann, Punie & Ward, 2006). This raises questions regarding the kind of interaction between actors that needs to take place when actions need to be coordinated or orchestrated. Moreover, previous domestication research has mainly studied situations where outcomes were not measured against standards or performances of other people. However, clearly some domestication efforts may be considered better than others, because they lead to more successful outcomes. How does this affect the domestication process?

The form of collective play we analyse is called *raiding*. During raids, large groups of players (commonly between 10 to 40 people) battle the game's most challenging monsters in a series of highly complex combat manoeuvres. If successful in defeating the monster, players are rewarded with powerful items, titles and acclaim of fellow players. Because raids cannot be completed singlehandedly, only as group, it is a form of play that requires a certain level of organisation. Consequently, players form guilds to set up and run play sessions. With internal systems for distribution of goods, attendance keeping and roster regulation, guilds are the hub of social, cultural and material distribution in raiding communities. Since guilds are organizations that explicitly facilitate and orchestrate technology use (in this case play), they appear well-suited to investigate domestication as collective achievement. Furthermore, to address the second topic of performance and

domestication, raiding is a form of technology use where; a) the technology itself respond to your performance, b) players employ additional technologies to track and measure each other (Ask 2017), and c) is situated in a technoculture preoccupied by achievement and status. Unlike the domestication of for example a dishwasher, where satisfactory domestication means 'making it work', the domestication of a video game usually invites considerations of degree of success. Games are, in and of themselves, systems of rationality that encourages goal oriented thinking (Grimes & Feenberg, 2009). While the valuation of performance may vary (Taylor, 2006), it is worth noting that the domestication of WoW is of a system with win/loss conditions, ranking procedures, and continuous feedback.

In this paper, we are not concerned with raiding as such but with the domestication efforts that result in preconditions of playing: skills, ways of understanding the game and the related technologies, and knowledge about the game. We assume that the collective domestication, taking place in guilds, is needed for raiding, and that raiding produces feedback that may invite renewed domestication effort. In addition to studying the effect of performance measurements, we analyse the role and amount of management to coordinate or orchestrate collective domestication according to accounts provided by players of WoW. In the next section, we discuss domestication theory in greater detail to identify how we may use and further develop it as a tool for studying collective enactments of technology.

Domestication as individual and collective enactments

Domestication theory was developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s through cultural studies analysis of the uses of media, with an emphasis on what Silverstone & Hirch (1992) call the double articulation of technology and content. It was subsequently developed along two routes; one grounded in media studies, the other in technology studies (Haddon, 2006, 2011). The media studies approach emerged from audience studies and the analysis of how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) were appropriated in British families, including single-earner families, elderly people, and teleworkers, with increased focus on context, culture and symbolic meaning in relation to goods (Haddon, 2006, 2007). Domestication was considered to be about 'how the entry of ICTs into the home is managed, how these technologies are physically (and symbolically) located within the home, how they are fitted into our routines and hence time structures and how we display them to others, and by so doing give out messages about ourselves' (Haddon, 2007, p. 26).

This paper employs the technology studies approach to domestication due to its emphasis on enactments in wider everyday life contexts than the household (Sørensen, 2006). Another advantage is the implied blurring of binaries like producer/consumer and public/private. This is important when analysing activities in collectives larger than households, like workplaces or organised leisure. Furthermore, it makes no a priori assumptions about the nature of domestication processes. Domestication analysis based on technology studies pursues three aspects of making technologies a part of everyday life: the practices involved when using the technology, the resulting symbolic interpretations (meaning or sense-making), and the learning involved (cognitive issues) (Sørensen, Aune & Hatling, 2000; Sørensen, 2006).

Domestication theory has been applied to a wide set of technologies and systems like multimedia at a national level (Brosveet & Sørensen, 2000), online technologies in small businesses (Harwood, 2011), home pregnancy tests (Childerhose & MacDonald, 2013), public spaces (Koch & Latham, 2013), electric toothbrushes (Carter, Green & Thorogood, 2013), Disney media products (Sørenssen, 2014), webpages of local governments (Liste & Sørensen, 2015), and digital games in the lives of older adults (De Schutter, Brown & Abeele, 2015). These studies show that when an artefact is domesticated, it is integrated in practices in ways that may result in reproduction or transformation of existing activities – or even in new activities (e.g., net surfing did not exist before the computer and the internet). The symbolic interpretation provides meaning to the artefact through sense-making. The concern for learning emphasises the temporal quality of domestication as an ongoing process that may be influenced by experience or input from others, for example instruction from other players or by reading manuals. Domestication may also be unsuccessful – e.g., a piece of software may be wrongly employed or used in a very limited fashion – or it may even fail, for example, when an artefact is left unused in a closet. Of course, domestication may also be an issue of controversy.

At the core of the approach is 'the active user'. This idea represents a focus on context, practice and everyday life as important elements in the shaping of experiences and meanings, facts and artefacts. How may we conceptualise what users do when they domesticate? With reference to actor-network theory (e.g., Latour, 2005), we may see domestication as a process of assembling human and non-human elements. This production of heterogeneous assemblages entails the making of links to, e.g., other artefacts, other practices, and other people, as well as engaging in interpretative and organisational efforts (Liste & Sørensen, 2015). All these observations, including the emphasis on studying practice, sense-making and learning, should be as valid for collective as it is for individual domestication of technology.

Furthermore, it seem reasonable to assume that normally, the assembly work or the domestication related to a given technology or set of technologies reflect the unfolding of a user purpose or rationale. People will domesticate technologies in order to achieve something, like performing tasks in a better way, being entertained or making food. Of course, one cannot always expect to reach set goals. Domestication happens in conjunction with the acts of objects and other people. Furthermore, action is under-determined (Latour 2005: 45); domestication may produce surprises. Still, it is pertinent to inquire into the effects of rationales and goals with respect to domestication. More so in the case of collective domestication with performance measurements, since we expect an impact of orchestration and leadership.

Even if domestication studies has focused on single-actor strategies, there has been some concern regarding interaction between users. Eric Hirsch (1992), analysing how a British middle-class family consumes information and communication technologies (ICT), highlights the transactions regarding the appropriation and meaning of ICTs inside as well as outside the household. He finds that the consumption of ICTs was shaped by and shaping the family's norms and values, but it was in particular the parents that expressed and upheld these norms and values and to a considerable extent managed the children's ICT practices. Thus, even in small units like a household, domestication processes are usually managed. However, the content and extent of management may vary. For example, Sigurdadottir (2016) and Sigurdadottir & Sørensen (forthcoming) find that teachers using digital games in their classes, exercise considerable freedom to shape such

teaching. Often without any resistance from the pupils, the teachers manage the way digital games are domesticated for learning in classroom settings.

Collective forms of domestication do not have to involve explicit management. Tove Håpnes' (1996) study of a hacker collective confirms this. She found that their domestication efforts were shaped by a balance of competition and collaboration, fuelled by the pleasant experience of being creative. Here, there were no explicit exercise of management or leadership. The domestication of computers and software happened in a distributed fashion. We interpret this to be the outcome of shared norms and values among these hackers, suggesting that their domestication efforts reflected the existence of what we inspired by Durkheim (1933) may call a moral community. A moral community is a group of people who is integrated and coordinated through their sharing of norms and beliefs to the extent that they have little need of leadership or management. Members of the group may disagree on some issues but their norms and beliefs are sufficiently in consonance to allow for synchronized domestication. Generally, moral issues are important with respect to domestication (Silverstone, 2006).

On this basis, we propose the existence of two ideal types of collective domestication. The first, moral community-based domestication, allows collective domestication of technology to be tacitly distributed and performed by the members in an autonomous fashion. A shared understanding across the collective of what is to be achieved, supported by the material features of the collective practice, help to orchestrate the process. Alternatively, collective domestication may require leadership and management due to disagreements about goals, about the material features of the group's activities, and about the right ways to perform these activities. Thus, domestication would have to be explicitly negotiated and organised. We call this managed domestication.

To conclude, our aim is to describe and conceptualise collective domestication, using playing of *World of Warcraft* as a case. First, we ask about the potential impact of different goals or rationales, focusing on moral community or managed domestication. This means to analyse accounts of how rationales were articulated and enacted, possible controversies about their interpretation, the degree of management, and the negotiation processes among the players regarding practice and sense-making with respect to WoW. To what extent did collective domestication happen through moral community or management? As part of this analysis, we examine the effect of performance measures on the domestication processes. Did feedback about players' efforts, informing about the relative success or failure of the collective domestication efforts when raiding, lead to greater emphasis on management?

World of Warcraft and the material affordances of cooperation. A note on method

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a very successful Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), which has received considerable scholarly attention (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Nardi, 2010). Set in a fictional world with orcs, elves and goblins, the game invites players to take on the role as hero by saving the world from great perils, such as the resurrection of an evil mage as well as distinctively less glamourous combat, like helping out a local farmer with his boar infestation. Players develop their avatars by

completing progressively more complex and challenging tasks, and as the game progresses completing such tasks increasingly require the cooperation and interaction with other players. The codes that govern the game world have been designed for interdependency and cooperation in order to foster group play. WoW offers access to mutually supporting roles where some specialize in dealing damage (to monsters), some in healing wounds, and others in absorbing damage. To offset their specialization, each role also have weaknesses, for example are avatars that excel at absorbing damage (tanks) quite poor at dealing damage. Thus the game materially configures players to be dependent on strong social ties to complete tasks.

Although no official ranking system had been put in place to determine the best raiders, user-made sites like wowprogress.com and wowjitsu.com tracked guilds and generated worldwide ranking list based on who were the first to defeat new monsters. Thus, these lists provided one set of criteria for 'successful play'. However, there is not one common criteria of success, or even about the meaning of play, due to the many forms of engagements made possible by the game.

Online game playing includes the interpretation of the synthetic world (Castronova, 2005), made through the enactment of the game. Such worlds may be arenas for a range of activities: social interaction (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), trade (Castronova, 2005), work (Yee, 2006), increased literacy (Martin & Steinkuehler, 2010) and player production (Prax, 2012). Also, they are spaces of emergent practices and diversified strategies (Mortensen, 2008) as players develop new readings of the game. Player norms 'amplify, enhance, negate, accommodate, complement, and at times even ignore hard-coded game rules' (Steinkuehler, 2006:200). Thus, the domestication of an online game like WoW may be quite complex.

Thus, to study how guilds may domesticate WoW, we needed detailed, process-oriented data and chose to use a qualitative ethnographic design (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012). Further, given the assumption that player rationales would be important, we decided to use such categories as a basis of comparison to help identifying features of processes of collective domestication. We started out from the much-used dichotomy of casual versus hardcore gamers, or casual play versus power gaming, because it is frequently used by players themselves. Power gamers are seen to play in a goal oriented, instrumental and effective way (Juul, 2010), while, stereotypically, the casual player has a 'preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislike difficult games' (Juul, 2010:29).

During 2009, the first author did a one year participant observation study in a WoW raiding guild, referred to the here as "The Gummy Wolves". In addition, she did in-depth interviews with 18 WoW players, undertaken between 2008 and 2010. Six of those interviews were with other members of "The Gummy Wolves", done through chatting. Nine interviews were done with players recruited through social networks and conducted either face to face or though chat. While these interviewees were selected without prior knowledge about their way of playing WoW, it turned out that most of them were causal players according to the above definition. The final five interviews were undertaken with players in the elite guild Ensidia, a highly profiled and successful WoW guild. The interviews followed a loose structure, aiming to get information about motivation for playing, preparation for and experience from raiding, and what playing WoW meant.

Game ethnography, as underlying this paper, has become a well-established method, which emphasises the importance of deep engagement with the virtual world (Boellstorff et al., 2012). For 10 of the 12 months the first author spent in "The Gummy Wolves", she was one of the guild's two raid leaders and part of the officer team that organised the guild and its events. In this position, she influenced the policies and practices of the community while also having access to the inner workings of the guild and raid operations. Like experienced by other game ethnographers, the roles of player and researcher were difficult to separate. A well-established gamer identity gave access to and credibility within the community, but it forced prioritising depth over analytical distance to the research subjects (McKee & Porter, 2009). The two authors have discussed the validity, interpretation and implications of the fieldwork observation as well as the interview data. In this manner, information has been shared and assessed. The exchanges have partly served as a way of analysing data but also of managing potential bias emerging from the deep engagement with WoW of the first author during the fieldwork.

Blurring and hiding roles raise ethical concerns (Sveningsson, 2003, Boellstorff, 2012, pp. 129). Thus, the intention of doing research was disclosed when applying for membership in the guild, and consent was explicitly asked for during interviews and logged play sessions. All interviews were taped or recorded from chat and later transcribed. Transcriptions were then coded, together with field notes and player made documents gathered during the participant observation study. The interviewees from the group of casuals and "The Gummy Wolves" have been anonymised. For those from Ensidia, we use the actual player names since their public role is of relevance. The choices regarding anonymity was made explicit to the interviewees. Coding and analysis have been inspired by an abductive methodology (Reichertz, 2007), combining an open approach with the use of domestication theory to refine and combine codes.

When focusing on player rationales we found that the interviewees outside "The Gummy Wolves" could be categorised as being either hardcore (Ensidia members) or casual players (from several guilds). Those who belonged to "The Gummy Wolves" we call 'moderates' because in terms of their rationale for playing; they occupied a middle ground in an effort to combine successful raiding with being social.

In the following, we analyse how these three player rationales affected the domestication process. We study how players appropriated the game of WoW and related technologies by developing game practices, making sense of WoW, acquiring skills and becoming familiar with strategies of play. Our study of sense-making has mainly been concerned with players' interactional identity-making, while we have examined the cognitive aspects of domestication by looking at how players learnt and taught others about the game. We explore accounts of raiding primarily as accounts of performance: success or failure.

Previously, we suggested two ideal forms of collective domestication: moral community and managed. Since we characterised hardcore and casual players as sharing a respective main goal, did they follow of a moral community approach, while the collective domestication of "The Gummy Wolves" followed a managed pattern due to their pursuit of a more complex rationale? We examine this suggestion by analysing the three player groups in turn, starting with the hardcores.

Player rationale I: Hardcore – being the best

Ensidia was ranked as the best WoW guild in the world during the period of data gathering. To the extent that there are celebrities among WoW players, Ensidia fits the bill. Their website posted news, not just about the guild, but about gaming more generally, complete with a social networking platform (user generated news, blogs, profiles, etc.) for their fans to discuss and to build a community. During her fieldwork, the first author noted how her fellow players would shrug at Ensidia's accomplishments by mobilising the stereotypical image of the hardcore gamer, arguing that Ensidia was successful because the members had 'no life'.

Hardcore gamers are stereotypically seen as players with "too much" time and effort invested in the game; as taking the game "too seriously". This description was decisively dismissed by the hardcore interviewees when they explained what they saw as a successful, "proper" hardcore raider. Instead, we observed a rationale of competitiveness that structured their domestication as they aligned practices and sense-making, aiming to be the best players in the world. The interviewees from Ensidia labelled themselves as hardcore because they redefined the meaning of hardcore from being a person with no social life outside the game – a "no-lifer" – to being a person with skill and determination. They refuted the idea that hardcore players spend more time playing than others and highlighted virtues like patience and sacrifice. Ragebar argued that they actually spent less time playing because their skills allowed for highly effective and productive play sessions:

> Being hardcore, ha ha! It's not like most people think. We play in a hardcore guild, but we don't need to play 24/7 to make it. There's almost a mathematical formula behind it: the better the guild equals the faster you can complete X, Z, etc. (Ragebar).

Of course, hardcore players devote much time and resources to gaming, but time spent on playing is a problematic measure for categorizing players (Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen, 2011; Karlsen, 2013). The Ensidia interviewees dismissed the focus on time as the key feature of hardcore play and constructed a narrative where they (as gamers) were likened to professional athletes, "giving it all": «Hardcore means having the will to hunt aggressively for a world-top kill and sacrifice some stuff for it [like skip a day from school/work or go to bed one hour later]» (Alex).

With regard to sense-making, the hardcore group domesticated WoW to counter outsiders' views by emphasising intensity of playing in terms of dedication, skill, and sacrifice. The competitive context shaped their domestication to provide a symbolic interpretation of hardcore playing of WoW where all efforts to become more competitive were desirable.

The strict hierarchical organisation of Ensidia was motivated by the ambition to be the best raiding guild and being able to deal with the attention they received. A small group of officers was engaged fulltime to run the guild and its website (known as Project Ensidia). The guild's vision and practice was not up for question; it was a matter of loyalty. Collective performance was always prioritised above individual enjoyment, 100% attendance was required, and all players were expected to manage their lives to allow for raids and for performing optimally. Without a satisfactory performance, membership would be revoked, regardless of social relationships.

Ensidia interviewees claimed to enjoy efficient, well-mastered task solving. Playing at this level also meant being deeply socially involved with the guild. The interviewees spoke highly of their companionship, a claim supported by an unusually low turnover:

> I guess the success of Ensidia and other higher end guilds comes from stronger bonds and leadership. I mean you look at the top 10 or 20 guilds world-wide, you can probably bet that the core of the guilds have been playing with each other for a very long time, and know each other inside out (Tjani).

Though the hardcore interviewees varied in age and social background, they seemed quite homogeneous. Their narratives about why and how they played were very similar, suggesting congruent, compatible domestication efforts. For these players the rationale behind playing was explicit and shared: they had deliberately sought out this community in order to play in a competitive way. The competitive rationale produced clear priorities for all three dimensions of domestication; on a practical level, they would organise to be competitive, and the skills (cognitive) that they valued were performance oriented. It was tied together by their hardcore identity, where playing was to be competitive and dedicated. They appeared to be a moral community.

Player rationale II: Casual – friendship, family and fun

The interviewees considering themselves to be casual players pursued a different rationale in their domestication efforts, namely that of sociability. This meant to prioritise relationships and interaction with friends and family, which clearly affected their sense-making regarding WoW. Playing was mainly regarded as a good way of doing leisure. Several interviewees mentioned TV as an alternative, and they saw WoW simply as a way to relax after work. They configured the game as something that should not take precedence over other activities or take control of their life. Playing was a way of spending time with friends, including staying in touch with friends who now lived in other parts of the country.

Several casual interviewees belonged to "The Funny Club" (anonymized), a guild that emerged from an IRC chat group that they established during high school. Now, none of them lived in the same city, and game playing allowed the school-time friends to keep in touch. Other interviewed causals emphasized that game playing was about spending time with family. Minho even described WoW as a combined chat-room and game: «I am very social. I used it [WoW] a lot for talking. Instead of sitting on MSN to talk I go in there and talk and do stuff together [play]. Since we can do both things at the same time». Social aspects of raiding prioritised, and their involvement in raiding was based on a desire to play with friends and explore the game. Unlike the hardcore players, they insisted that engagement in rading should not come at the cost of friendship, family and fun. Their emphasis upon sociability and real life obligations clearly affected their domestication of the game, both in terms of practice and meaning as concerns for fellow members always trumped goals of progress. Amber provided a concrete example of this: "I was in a raid last week, but it had to be cancelled because one of the players had a kid that fell out of bed. It happens".

The emphasis on social benefits also dominated their practices and the way they were organised. The casuals' guilds consisted of friends, family or friends of friends. New members were invited on a friend of a friend basis. With a small officer group to organise raids and keep track of the guilds' wealth, the organisation tended to be fairly flat. Some had even experimented with democratically elected officers, while others went with the common option of giving that responsibility to the more experienced, dedicated and willing members of the guild. There were few if any obligations and raids were organised on an ad hoc basis.

Another prominent feature of this type of player community was the strong link between online and offline relationships. This also affected the domestication of WoW. As mentioned, quite a few were playing with friends or family, using the game as a way of interacting with them. The result was a blurred boundary between online and offline, which included practices like "real life meetups" and using forums to share pictures of real life events such as holidays and weddings. Thus, they domesticated the game to be able to utilise extensively the game's options for social interaction.

The focus on social interaction also shaped the way players shared information and developed new skill sets in-game. Skilled and knowledgeable members were respected, but there were no incentives or pressures to learn more about WoW. The websites used to find information were similar to those employed by the hardcore players, but the casual interviewees also emphasised the importance of other players as a source of learning. Actually, to use guild-chat or asking someone directly were favoured ways of finding things out. Amber described this as making informal one-night-mentorships:

> I experience our raiding environment in the guild as good. I like to read up on
>
> what to do, while at the same time allying myself with a kind of "supporter" if we
>
> are going to a new instance. Preferably of the same class or at least of a DPS class
>
> [same archetype as her]. To hear a bit about what's going on here and what
>
> happens when. Have also had new players following me, where I supported them.
>
> I think it's really nice and very social (Amber).

Thus, the casual players had collectively domesticated WoW to mean spending time with friends and family. In this way, they were a moral community albeit with a different set of norms and beliefs than the hardcores. Their measure of success was to explore the game world with people they cared about, and their domestication reflected this. However, our interviewees were highly skilled and spent much time in game. Emphasising social relations is not unique to this style of playing, but the casual interviewees stood out by doing so explicitly and rating it much higher than game-related progress. The rationale of sociability shaped their domestication towards relaxed playing where social intercourse and game knowledge was achieved together.

Thus, hardcore and casual appear as two distinctly different strategies of collectively domesticating WoW, but both according to a moral community approach. What happens when a group of players starts with an explicit ambition of balancing success in game playing with social aims?

Player rationale III: Moderates – balancing progress and real-life commitments

As already noted, "The Gummy Wolves" was a guild that wanted to strike a balance between performance and social benefits of playing WoW. Their game playing achievements were pretty good. Ranked among the top 6-7% on international ranking sites the "The Gummy Wolves" profiled themselves as a mature raiding guild that demanded commitment, but played in a less time-consuming way. The founding members were long-time gamers who wanted to raid without having to spend most of their leisure time playing. When the guild decided on a middle ground policy, it seemed like the sensible choice; not spending too much time (like the stereotypical hardcore players) but also succeeding (unlike the stereotypical casual player). However, this balancing act turned out continuously to create controversies in the guild and required a lot of work. It was accepted as a fact that moderate demands of players regarding attendance in raids, performance and preparation were harmful to the guild's ability to make progress, game-wise:

> I have enjoyed being here [in the guild]. Most of the people are laidback, but still take the raiding semi-seriously. People can talk shit and usually don't take it [bad] if there is some friendly mocking around. (…) But, because it's a friendly guild I realise that the raiding isn't pro and sometimes it also doesn't feel so nice (Aaron).

Thus, the major challenge facing "The Gummy Wolves" in their domestication of WoW was to balance social concerns with being competitive, a problem many MMORPG gamers have encountered (Eklund & Ask 2013). Players frequently discussed topics like what is a satisfactory level of success, how to optimize the use of available time, and what may be demanded of commitment in a "real-life friendly" guild? The ambivalence expressed in such questions was evident from the sense-making as well as the practical organisation of playing WoW. The collective domestication, pursuing a rationale of moderation, produced the idea that playing was a challenging leisure activity. It should be a hobby on par with watching TV but also about performing well during raids. The guild wanted the best of two worlds: the success of hardcore players and the more relaxed social life of casuals. For example, "healthy respect for Real Life obligations", which was stated as a goal in "The Gummy Wolves Lowdown" policy document, was realised by a relatively light raiding schedule. "The Gummy Wolves" had four raid nights per week and demanded only 50% attendance. The offset was a requirement that everybody should show up prepared, having read strategies and knowing what was going to happen. The idea was that such preparation would enable the guild to raid more efficiently:

> Show up prepared. We will be posting strategies on the forum in advance when possible. Read them, watch the movies, discuss them. The raid leader is there to help improve on strategies, not to babysit you (from "The Gummy Wolves Lowdown", a document listing raid rules in the guild forum).

However, this idea was not realised. It was always the same few players that developed guild strategies. During raids, the raid leader usually ended up having to explain the strategy before it was carried out. Everybody knew that many members came unprepared,

but nobody was excluded for this. While the rules stated that the guild forum should be a hub for discussing strategies and helping players to improve, reality was that the off topic threads filled with funny pictures of cats and boobs were most frequently used. Similarly, the performance of all members was continually evaluated. For those underperforming, guild rules required an "improve or leave" reaction. However, this rarely happened since the roles of officer and friend proved difficult to combine.

Nonetheless, the officers spent much time and effort in trying to make the guild successful by addressing domestication efforts. Since the ambivalence embedded in the moderate rationale meant that almost all situations required negotiations, the collective domestication needed to be managed. The officers created several systems to make the most out of the available people and time. One system focused on training and follow-up of members, for example by assigning experienced members (usually officers with relevant knowledge) to candidate members or members who were falling behind. This worked as a way of sharing expertise and improving the standards of the guild while also standardising the process of evaluation. Another was to track attendance, and give notice to those falling below the "magic" 50 percent line of required attendance, and encourage them to attend more raids. In addition, the internal system for distribution of goods rewarded attendance and dedication, and punished absentees. These were all attempts at managing the collective domestication, to reach the supposedly shared goal of being both social and competitive.

Many in the guild were critical of the balance actually struck between performance and social ties. Often, the officers considered taking the guild in a more hardcore direction with stricter demands on players and access to playing. However, none of officers were comfortable with the confrontation that came when trying to remove unqualified people. This led to evasive strategies, like simply to ignore underperformance by giving second and third chances to players, anticipating that the problem would somehow be resolved. The first author, in her role as officer, would sometimes bench problematic players for weeks in the hope that they would simply get bored and leave voluntarily. Another strategy was to build routines that could serve as standards, thus legitimizing officers' actions. Thus, tracking attendance and performance was a way of ensuring the guild had a working roster of players, but it was also a way of providing "objective" evidence that a player should be removed.

The moderate rationale meant that most decisions had to be explained, and the officers had to demonstrate that proper consideration had been exercised, and that the decision was for the common good. Especially during times of low attendance when the guild had to cancel raids, it was difficult to keep the members content with the roster. Some demanded that the officers kicked out those who did not show, while others argued that they were needed because there was not enough members to raid. In addition, they argued: "they were good people". Even when attendance records or performance logs identified problems, the guild still disagreed about what constituted "good enough".

"The Gummy Wolves" had a high turnover, which indicated domestication problems. Members frequently left because they wanted either better performance or greater emphasis on social interaction. In addition, quite a few members stopped playing, explaining their choice to quit as the result of a burnout. The game had become too much hard work with too little success and fun (Eklund & Ask, 2013). While in some aspects "The Gummy Wolves" were a homogenous group consisting of largely white, straight European men in their early twenties, the members approached the game substantially

different. Some raided seven nights per week while others barely squeezed in two raids, some had years of experience as raiders while others were just starting. However, the diversity of practice and actors is insufficient to explain the domestication problems of "The Gummy Wolves" because similar variations in time spent and experience were also present in the hardcore and the casual group. However, unlike the competitive and social rationales, the rationale of moderation seemed to provide too fuzzy directions to guide the collective domestication process in a tacit manner. The lack of moral community made it difficult to achieve stable outcomes without management.

Conclusion: the dynamics of collective domestication

In this paper, we have analysed how organised groups like guilds engaging in raiding in the online game World of Warcraft domesticate technology when it needs to be done in a collective fashion. What characterise such processes? What are the effects of norm and beliefs – rationales – on domestication efforts, and what are the consequences when performance is measured? We believe such questions provide an interesting challenge for domestication theory. Firstly, because users in such situations rely on individual (as seen in Ask 2011) as well as on collective domestication to produce a configuration of meaning and practices that allows for orchestrated action. Secondly, WoW is an interactive technology that requires active user choices, and with clear success/failure conditions. In such cases, domestication is not simply about finding *a* use, to 'tame' the technology to make it usable; it is about reaching set goals. These goals and the underlying user rationales may vary. This allows us to analyse their effects.

What about the effect of performance measurements? Definitively, this helped shape the domestication efforts if performance was a concern. In the case of the casuals, it did not matter much because they used a flexible criterion, 'sociability', as their measure of success. To the hardcore, performance measurements fuelled an ongoing domestication effort to continuously improve their individual skills and group performance during raids. This was also the case with the moderates, but in a more complicated manner. In their case, performance measurements instigated searches for improvements but also produced dissatisfaction and conflicts regarding how measurements should be interpreted and used.

The three distinct user rationales proved to have considerable impact on domestication efforts. Theoretically, we suggested the existence of two ideal types of collective domestication; a moral community and a managed approach. The analysis confirmed our expectations. Two of the rationales, hardcore and causual, allowed for the first type (moral community), while the third, moderate rationale required the collective domestication to be managed. This difference was largely due to the interpretation of the rationales. Among hardcore and casual players, their respective rationales – winning and socialising – guided their domestication of WoW effectively because the main goal was shared. In both cases, configurations with a low level of conflict and a high degree of player satisfaction emerged.

As previously noted, raiding requires some form of leadership because somebody has to coordinate tasks and players, The hardcore described a strict form, to some extent also the moderates, while leadership with the casual interviewees was pragmatically relaxed and not much of an issue. Domestication was a different matter. The moral community approach allowed for tacitly distributed collective domestication, which could lead to distinctly different outcomes but it did not require explicit management. Success in

achieving goals, be it competition or socialising, was based on shared technology and shared aims which facilitated the development of compatible practices and sense-making.

As we have seen, the moderate rationale made collective domestication more demanding. This was due to the ambiguities arising from trying to balance two very different goals, while disagreeing about the interpretation of the moderate rationale. This required an explicit management of the collective domestication of WoW by "The Gummy Wolves", which also involved negotiations about the very meaning of play. To deal with this, the officers in "The Gummy Wolves" created and sustained explicit managerial systems to stabilise a common rationale. For example, they introduced bureaucratic measures like check lists for attendance, suggestions of performance standards, and running evaluation of all members. This standardization worked to some extent, but the underlying ambiguity of the moderate rationale remained. To create a working rationale to direct the domestication process required comprehensive and bureaucratic leadership to achieve what we have called managed domestication.

Previously, the concept of domestication has been used to emphasise "how users matter" (Oudshorn & Pinch, 2005); that practices and sense-making are not pre-determined by technology. However, when domestication has to be a collective achievement to allow coordinated, compatible actions, this imposes limitations. A player participating in a raid cannot pursue a practice that does not fit with the practices of other teams members without negative consequences. Thus, domestication has to be collective when users depend on the compatibility of each other's domestication achievements. If individual domestication is the unfolding of a strategy for use, then collective domestication is both unfolding a strategy for use and facilitating orchestration of use. In addition, when performances that result from the domestication are measured and taken seriously, it may lead to debates about how to improve results and what this requires of domestication efforts.

To summarise: independent of performance measurements, we have observed two main forms of collective domestication: the moral community and the managed approach. They emerged from features of rationales underlying the domestication efforts, or rather, the degree of agreement with respect to what was to be achieved and how outcomes were assessed. With a high level of agreement, the situation was consonant and reflecting moral community. Disagreement, on the other hand, produced dissonance, which required management of the collective domestication efforts. This required work and could also result in a high rate of turnover and burnout among guild members, as we learned from the study of "the Gummy Wolves".

Domestication theory has served well as a point of departure for analysing collective domestication of the online computer game World of Warcraft but it needs to add a sensitivity to the potential interactive aspects as well as a strong focus on orchestration; how this is performed and why. Furthermore, some of the underlying ideas about users' freedom of using technology is challenged when performance measurements are introduced. Since we cannot generalise from a study of online game playing, which admittedly is a particular activity, more research is needed to study collective domestication in other settings where performance is measured, like schools or workplaces. Probably, there are more varieties to be discovered than the moral community and the managed approaches.

References

Ask, K. (2011). Spiller du riktig? - Tid, moral og materialitet i domestiseringen av et online dataspill [Are you playing the right way? Time, moral and materiality in the domestication of an online computer game]. *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, 18, 140-157.

Ask, K. (2017). The Value of Calculations: The Coproduction of Theorycraft and Player Practices. *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society*, epub ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/0270467617690058

Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD Research*, 1 (1). Downloaded from http://mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm

Berker, T., Hartmann, M., Punie, Y., & Ward, K.J. (Eds.). (2006). *Domestication of Media and Technology*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of Warcraft.*

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B, Pearce, C & Taylor, T.L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds. A handbook of method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds : the business and culture of online games.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carter, S., Green, J., & Thorogood, N. (2013). The domestication of an everyday health technology: A case study of electric toothbrushes. *Social Theory & Health,* 11(4), 344-367. DOI: 10.1057/sth.2013.15

Childerhose, J. E., & MacDonald, M. E. (2013). Health consumption as work: The home pregnancy test as a domesticated health tool. *Social Science & Medicine*, 86, 1-8. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.02.035

Corneliussen, H. G., & Rettberg, J. W. (Eds.). (2008). *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity : A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

De Schutter, B., Brown, J. A., & Abeele, V. V. (2015). The domestication of digital games in the lives of older adults. *New media & society*, 17(7), 1170-1186. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814522945

Durkheim, E. (1933). *The division of labor in society*. New York: The Free Press

Eklund, L., & Ask, K. (2013). The strenuous task of maintaining and making friends: Tensions between play and friendship in MMOs. DiGRA 2013:DeFragging Game Studies. Downloaded from http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:684017/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Haddon, L. (2006). Empirical Studies using the domestication framework. In T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie, & K.J. Ward (Eds.), *Domestication of Media and Technology* (pp. 103-122). Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press

Haddon, L. (2007). Roger Silverstone's legacies: domestication. *New Media & Society,* 9(1), 25–32. doi:10.1177/1461444807075201

Harwood, S. A. (2011). The domestication of online technologies by smaller businesses and the 'busy day'. *Information and Organization*, 21(2), 84-106. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2011.03.002

Hirsch, E. (1992). The long term and the short term of domestic consumption: an ethnographic case study. In R. Silverstone & E. Hirsch (Eds.). *Consuming technologies: media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 208-226). London: Routledge.

Håpnes, T. (1996). Not in Their Machines: How Hackers Transform Computers into Subcultural Artefacts. In M. Lie, & K.H. Sørensen (Eds.). *Making Technology Our Own: Domesticating Technology into Everyday Life* (pp. 121-150). Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution : reinventing video games and their players.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kallio, K. P., Mäyrä, F., & Kaipainen, K. (2011). At Least Nine Ways to Play: Approaching Gamer Mentalities. *Games and Culture*, 6(4), 327 –353. doi:10.1177/1555412010391089

Karlsen, F. (2013). *A World of Excesses: Online Games and Excessive Playing*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Koch, R., & Latham, A. (2013). On the hard work of domesticating a public space. *Urban Studies,* 50(1), 6-21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F0042098012447001

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lie, M. & Sørensen, K.H. (Eds.). *Making Technology Our Own: Domesticating Technology into Everyday Life*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Liste, L., & Sørensen, K. H. (2015). Consumer, client or citizen? How Norwegian local governments domesticate website technology and configure their users. *Information, Communication & Society*. 18(7), 733-746. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.993678

Martin, C., & Steinkuehler, C. (2010). Collective Information Literacy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 7(4), 355–365. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304%2Felea.2010.7.4.355

Mortensen, T. E. (2008). Humans playing World of Warcraft: or Deviant Strategies? In H.G. Corneliussen & J.W. Rettberg (Eds.). D*igital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (pp. 203-224). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

McKee, H. A., & Porter, J. E. (2009). Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds. I*JIRE International Journal of Internet Research Ethics,* 2(1), 5–37.

Nardi, B. A. (2010). *My life as a night elf priest : an anthropological account of World of warcraft.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Prax, P. (2012). Co-creative interface development in MMORPGs – the case of World of Warcraft add-ons. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 4(1), 3–24. doi:10.1386/jgvw.4.1.3_1

Reichertz, J. (2007). Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory. In A. Bryant, & K. Charmaz (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (pp. 214-228). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Silverstone, R. (2006). Domesticating domestication. Reflections on the life of a concept. In T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie, & K.J. Ward (Eds.). *Domestication of Media and Technology* (pp. 229-248). Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press

Silverstone, R., & Hirsch, E. (Eds.). (1992). *Consuming technologies: media and information in domestic spaces*. London: Routledge.

Steinkuehler, C. (2006). The Mangle of Play. *Games and Culture*, 1(3), 199–213. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F1555412006290440

Steinkuehler, C. A., & Williams, D. (2006). Where everybody knows your (screen) name: Online games as "third places." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 11(4). DOI: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x

Sveningsson, M. (2003). Ethics in Internet Ethnography. In E. Buchanan (Ed.). *Readings in Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies* (pp. 45-61). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing

Sørensen, K. H. (2006). Domestication: The Enactment of Technology. In T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie, & K.J. Ward (Eds.). *Domestication of Media and Technology* (pp. 40-61). Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press

Sørensen, K. H., Aune, M., & Hatling, M. (2000). Against linearity : on the cultural appropriation of science and technology. In M. Dierkes & C. von Grote (Eds.). *Between Understanding and Trust. The Public, Science and Technology* (pp. 165-179). London: Routledge.

Sørenssen, I. K. (2014). Domesticating the Disney Tween Machine: Norwegian Tweens Enacting Age and Everyday Life. Doctoral Dissertation, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). P*lay between worlds : exploring online game culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Yee, N. (2006). The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play. Games and Culture, 1(1), 68–71. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F1555412005281819