

When Player Communities Revolt Against the Developer: A Study of Pokémon GO and Diablo Immortal

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Abstract. Several popular contemporary online multiplayer games and franchises are developed and managed with the aid of multiple data sources. Despite the control and insight that the utilization of data brings to game design and business decisions, video game developers occasionally receive backlash from their player communities. Examples include the announcement of Diablo Immortal at BlizzCon 2018, and the #HearUsNiantic campaign among Pokémon GO players in August 2021. In this article we analyse these two examples and demonstrate the importance of understanding player behavior more broadly than what can be derived from quantitative in-game data. In both the analyzed cases, players' offline culture played a paramount role in the backlash. We argue that the primary reason for the observed backlash is that the players' lives have become intertwined with digital products, and hence, changing these products alters the players' lives as well.

Keywords: Game design · game development · video games · game industry · player culture · player communities

1 Introduction

Video games are complex forms of art that combine elements of story-telling [13], visuals, audio, game mechanics and sometimes also pervasive elements [11] into digital artifacts. The variance in video games is enormous in terms of all the above mentioned aspects. The complexity of video games makes it difficult to predict player behavior, how well the games sell and how long players stay engaged with them [14]. Even with multiple data sources and analytics at their disposal, popular franchises still occasionally make decisions which make customers revolt and turn against the creator [6]. These situations are always unique, but can be mitigated by better understanding the customers [6].

Recently, player behavior modelling through data-driven approaches has gained significant traction [4]. This approach relies on automatically collecting logged data of player behavior and using statistical or machine learning methods to profile players and predict their future behavior as well as what they enjoy [4, 14]. Besides player profiling, data-driven approaches can be used for, for example,

procedural content creation [5], automatically tweaking game settings such as difficulty [15] and understanding player retention across multiple situations [14]. In the case of trying to predict player retention, the data can consist of, for example, players' monthly playtime, playtime of individual sessions, data on the situations where players quit individual play sessions and data on the situations leading to quitting playing more permanently [14].

The recent upswing in data-driven game development has also raised concerns, in particular pertaining to ethics and fairness [12]. Algorithmic design decisions may marginalize certain player subgroups and the use of inscrutable machine learning models to analyze player data introduces trust issues [12]. A recent study showed that there are tensions in implementing ethical game design, for example, it may sometimes compete with functionality [1]. In addition, there are several other potential blind spots in data-driven development. In this study we focus on the player communities surrounding online games and franchises. These communities can have various game-related activities and culture that, while function outside the game, are still connected to it [2, 9]. For example, players may engage in conversations about specific game mechanics or gather together to play a game in a specific way that only makes sense in the community context [9]. As video games are constantly developed and updated, player communities are hence in constant danger of losing the ability to practise an activity they enjoy. This leads to situations where players may be prepared to vigorously contact developers and ask them to revert changes, or change the course of their business, in order to save the community surrounding the game or the franchise.

In this short paper, we look at situations where player communities have openly revolted against the developer and demanded that they change the course of their game development. We focus on two famous real-world examples where game design has been disrupted by the player community. Based on these examples, we argue that while data-driven development is effective in increasing player retention and boosting income, it is crucial to also account for the player communities that exist around video games and franchises.

2 Two examples: Diablo Immortal announcement and HearUsNiantic

2.1 Materials and methods

We wanted to investigate cases where the playing community has revolted against game developers regarding their design decisions, with the consequence that the developer has shifted plans in response. To this end, we selected two recent and highly public cases from world renown franchises: Diablo and Pokémon. As our first example, we look at the announcement of Diablo Immortal in November 2018 and its aftermath, and as our second example we focus on the #HearUsNiantic hashtag in August 2021. Basic information about these cases is given in Table 1. Both these examples are from developers who are well-known from

utilizing in-game data collection and business intelligence in their game development and design decisions.

Table 1. General information regarding the two cases discussed in this work

Case	Date	Developer	Game
Diablo Immortal announcement	November 2018	Blizzard Entertainment	Diablo Immortal
HearUsNiantic	August 2021	Niantic	Pokémon GO

Methodologically this work follows the netnography research approach [7], meaning we conducted ethnographic observations online to get acquainted with the player communities, their sentiment, the actions of the developer, the retaliation by the community and the underlying reasons and critique given by the players for their actions. When going through the two examples, we used the developers’ official sources³⁴ as the main source of evidence. Additionally, we observed posts and comments on the Blizzard official forums, and 3rd party online discussion forums including Reddit, Twitter, Discord and YouTube. These included, for example, videos of independent content creators (e.g. Quinn69, Rhykker, Mystic7) and posts on popular subreddits (e.g. r/pokemongo, and r/thesilphroad). The authors were both participants in the observed communities, and hence, conducted their observations first without collecting any notes or data. Upon writing this article we revisited the original data sources and made notes to support our analysis. Subsequently, from the community response, we derived recommendations for the developers on what caused the situation and how it could be avoided.

2.2 Announcement of Diablo Immortal

Description of events During a video game convention BlizzCon, Blizzard Entertainment hyped up and announced a new mobile game in the fan-favorite Diablo franchise for a hard core PC gamer audience. The event sparked controversy due to fans being heavily disappointed in the announcement, and the company seemingly not caring about the PC-focused audience. The announcement led to the production of multiple memes and heavy downvoting of all Diablo Immortal content across social media. For example, the announcement trailer on YouTube received hundreds of thousands dislikes during the first few days [10] which can still be seen in the video today as shown in Figure 1. A line from the Blizzard representative: *“Don’t you guys have phones?”* was interpreted on social media as condescending and even arrogant, while a line from one of the BlizzCon convention attendees: *“Is this an out-of-season April fools’ joke?”* was treated as a symbolic representation of the gamer audience.

³ For Diablo Immortal, <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/blizzcon/22653697/diablo-immortal-unveiled-at-blizzcon>

⁴ For Pokémon GO, <https://pokemongolive.com/post/sep-taskforce-update> accessed September 2021

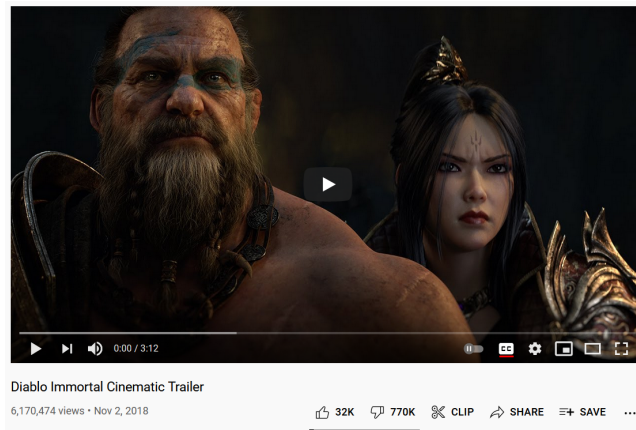


Fig. 1. A screenshot of the Diablo Immortal Announcement trailer on YouTube in September 2021. The downvotes following the announcement in 2018 can still be seen in the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtSmAwpVHsA>.

Following the announcement of Diablo Immortal in November 2018, Blizzard quickly delivered a statement that they were developing multiple Diablo franchise games and that Diablo Immortal was but one of many games in development, with the apparent aim of calming down the angered fans [10]. The next year at the same event, BlizzCon, Blizzard released a trailer for Diablo 4, a new PC game in the franchise, that was warmly welcomed by the audience.

Implications for franchise management Diablo Immortal appears to be a part of the Activision-Blizzard business strategy to expand towards the mobile gaming market. Interestingly, recent academic literature suggests PC gamers have low intentions to switch to mobile gaming [3]. This data may have deterred Blizzard from announcing a mobile Diablo game to a primarily PC gamer audience. The community backlash forced Blizzard to consider new data points and shift their communication strategy.

The lessons learned from the announcement of Diablo Immortal pertain to the needs and desires of an existing playerbase. Also in the social media discussion, Diablo Immortal was treated as an example of what happens when a company forgets their existing audience. Despite being criticised for being subjective [7], netnographic participant-observation approaches offer a way forward for understanding and better catering the existing player communities.

2.3 #HearUsNiantic

Case description The Pokémon GO player community has repeatedly criticized the game developer Niantic about not listening to the community's concerns. This type of behavior is typically observed in situations where the players' social lives and daily activities are closely tied to the game [6]. Maybe the

most notable example of Pokémon GO players revolting against the developer was the #HearUsNiantic campaign, which was the community’s reaction to Niantic decreasing the PokéStop interaction distance from 80 meters to 40 meters. Originally, the interaction radius was increased to 80 meters as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it was apparent to the community the change had many positive effects in addition to the social distancing. For instance, crossing dangerous roads or trespassing properties was often no longer necessary and disabled players could have an easier access to pokéstops.

In the wake of the commotion in social media, Niantic eventually reverted the pokéstop interaction radius back to 80 meters. Moreover, Niantic set up a ”task force” consisting of players and community representatives in order to continue the dialogue with players and better take into account any concerns about Pokémon GO. This response from Niantic indicates they acknowledge the importance of the opinions of the player communities that exist outside, but connected to, their game.

Implications for game development In addition to the ”Niantic task force”, other ways to gain insight into player communities include player surveys and interviews, ethnographic observations and data, social media data, theoretical knowledge and history-based understanding of the game franchise. Understanding player communities can make a huge difference business wise, as it can open new opportunities to design for more engaging features and support player profiling in boosting player retention [14]. In the case of Pokémon GO, the fusion between the game and the real world has contributed to the players’ lives being integrated to the game [9], meaning that changes to the game world influence the players’ real world behavior and interactions [2, 8].

In summary, as the data-based monetization approaches continue to evolve, they can affect game design in ways that can lead to strong criticism from players. For example, in Pokémon GO, players have to pay real money to obtain access to certain shiny pokémon, and at times, better events and prices are promised as a reward of active playing and using money. Sparrow et al. [1] discovered that video game developers are in fact often facing tensions between monetization approaches and ethics. While developers would want and be prepared to scaffold healthy player communities and behavior, business needs may get in way. Following the categorization of ethical considerations in data-driven game development by El-Nasr and Kleinman, video game developers may have to implement ”monetization techniques that encourage irresponsible spending” [12].

3 Discussion

3.1 Recommendations for practitioners

In both observed examples, the developers ultimately readjusted their course due to relentless community feedback. Blindly trusting modelled player behavior or business intelligence can backfire unless, for example in this case, the cultures and

innate desires of the player community are acknowledged. Hence, quantitative data should not be the sole basis of decision making, and it is paramount to acknowledge the real world players communities and how players interact with the games in the real world. This can be particularly true in location-based games such as Pokémon GO that purposefully intertwine the game with the physical world [2, 9, 8], but also relevant in the Diablo franchise whose fanbase connect with one another beyond individual games through online communication as well as offline events.

Players can revolt for several reasons and sometimes developers are forced to make decisions that go against the wishes of players [6]. In these situations understanding the player communities can still help mitigate the damage. Hence, developers and franchise managers are encouraged to maintain active participation among player communities. This was in fact implemented by Niantic when establishing "the Niantic Task force". Quick reaction to community feedback is also important. This was shown by the positive responses of the player communities in both cases.

While developers have the capability to rapidly adjust to community responses, constantly staying alert and reacting can be consuming. Thus, it is important to use of a wide range of tools to understand players and their needs. This includes quantitative player profiling [4, 14] and understanding the communities and cultures of various player demographics [7]. In addition, developers should carefully consider how they communicate their actions to the players [6].

3.2 Limitations and future work

In this work, we looked at a limited number of data sources. Hence, the analysis contains the risk of only acknowledging the mainstream opinions [12]. Furthermore, the authors conducted the majority of their observations as members of the player communities. This may have left us with blind spots. This study is also limited in scope, since we only looked at two examples. A more holistic study could reveal with greater certainty which game cultural factors are crucial in video game development and franchise management.

Future research agenda in this field should seek to identify the data and approaches needed to ensure video game developers stay on course with the wishes and desires of their players while simultaneously making financially profitable decisions. Yet, in the world of imperfect information, blindly trusting any singular data sources will ultimately always end in unintended consequences. The only way to mitigate the risks is to leverage multimodal data and be quick to react if things start to go wrong.

3.3 Conclusion

In this work, we revealed adverse consequences of focusing too much on quantitative data and ignoring online and offline player cultures. We looked at two examples where the players revolted against their developer: (1) the launch of Diablo immortal at Blizzcon 2018; and (2) the #hearUsNiantic social media

campaign in 2021. In both cases the player communities by large were unhappy with the direction where the developers were taking the franchises, not because of the digital artifacts themselves, but because their social lives were tied to them.

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