

Ciara Smith
Auburn University

Creation Myths, Community, and Collectanea: A Folk Group Case Study, or "Welcome to Dota, You Suck"¹

Abstract

This paper posits folklore studies as an appropriate lens through which to examine a specific gaming community. Game studies, itself an emerging but recognized field of study, offers an alternative possibility. In practice, folklore seems to be more appropriate. Ludology, the study of gameplay, lacks methodologies and metrics specific to the field by which to study communities, their practice, and the process of coherent group creation. Other gaming studies research focusing on gaming communities invariably employs techniques and terminology of other disciplines in order to contribute to the growing compendium of gaming studies that have been conducted. The following paper might be seen to contribute to practices by which folklore studies provide similarly lendable terms and methods; it also clearly represents the expansion of folklore studies into the realm of the digital world. Accordingly, three aspects of folk group study are examined: community beliefs, community creation practices, and communally significant material culture. In each, there is a necessary process of adjustment from the physical to the digital iterations of these traditionally examined aspects. These aspects represent only a few of the myriad possibilities of digital versions of folkloric methodologies.

Key words: gaming studies, digital folklore, gaming communities, MMOs, MOBAs

¹My title comes from a popular DotA guide, discussed below. The community members often use such harsh language with other community members in a stringent display of community building.

Introduction

In 2007, webcomic artist Randall Munroe posted a comic called "Online Communities" which features some of the most popular websites, social media systems, virtual communication tools and online gaming communities reimagined as a geographical map, complete with the Gulf of YouTube, the Mountains of Web 1.0, and the Blogipelago.² By 2010, this map was obsolete and he produced "Online Communities 2". After an interval of only three years, the area devoted to MySpace had shrunk considerably and is now located near the "Wasteland of Abandoned Social Networks"; Facebook sprawls Sino-Russia-like across the top of the map and YouTube has become its own land mass with smaller areas like the Britney mountains and the already-abandoned Rick-Rolling Hills. "Communities rise and fall", Munroe writes, "and total membership numbers are no longer a good measure of a community's current size and health. ['Online Communities 2'] uses size to represent total social activity in a community – that is, how much talking, playing, sharing, or other socializing happens there".³

Society is already happening online, and although geographic location is still an important factor in a person's life, online activity (and "where" this activity happens) is becoming just as important. While the art community expands to include the digital arts and humanity scholars examine the "written" word that is now being transmitted and consumed virtually, those who study the artists, the writers, and their societies must learn to incorporate the reality of online identity. Alan Dundes, claimed that:

The term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It doesn't matter what that factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own.⁴

In their chapter on folk groups in *Living Folklore*, an introduction to folklore study, Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens qualified this definition. Citing Dundes' and the definitions of a number of other folklorists in regard to folk groups, Sims and Stephens eventually arrive at what they consider the centrally important ideal of group: that the

² Munroe Randall, "Online Communities", Xkcd.com, <https://xkcd.com/256/>, date accessed 8 December 2015.

³ Munroe Randall, "Online Communities 2", Xkcd.com, <https://xkcd.com/802/>, date accessed 8 December 2015.

⁴ Dundes Alan, *Interpreting Folklore*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) (1980), pp. 6-7.

group is “doing folklore”. “Basically, if a group has folklore, it’s a folk group”.⁵ Such a definition is clearly applicable to online societies which produce or revolve around a number of recognized forms of folklore. Even before such an in-depth exploration as is attempted below, personal experience renders undeniable the claim that online communities produce such items as jokes and art – two forms that are mentioned in Dundes’ non-exhaustive list referenced by Sims and Stephens.⁶

The possibilities of a folkloric study of an online gaming community are potentially endless. Such a community’s status as a lore-producing group seems clear, but despite the current rise in participation in virtual folk groups there has not been so drastic a rise in corresponding study of such groups. Digital folklorist Trevor J. Blank has identified one of the potential reasons for this slight:

On the surface, it may appear that the identification of “folkness” via a technological medium (such as the internet) is presumptuous, or worse, inherently “non-folk”, since it requires some technical prowess with computer-mediated communication in order to be engaged. However, there is an inborn “folk” presence in cyberspace by virtue of the fact that people are behind nearly every symbolic interaction that takes place online and through new media technology.⁷

Technology, Blank claims, is merely a conduit through which folkness is expressed.⁸ As stated in the Randall Munroe quote above, online communities are in a constant state of rise and fall. Even as communities are abandoned, the nature of the Internet itself means that an archive of these communities is already being created.

One of the longest lived online communities is that of World of Warcraft. WoW, as it is generally known, is one of the most exoterically recognizable of online gaming communities, yet its community is incredibly esoteric.⁹ WoW is an MMO (or MMORPG), a massive multiplayer online game where players from all over the world can interact with others and make friends. Such a game is inherently social in nature, mimicking real life societies in terms of race, class, and faction divisions (somewhat

⁵ Sims Martha C. and Martine Stephens, *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, (Logan: Utah State University Press) (2011), p. 36.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 8.

⁷ Blank, Trevor J. *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, (Logan: Utah State University Press) (2012), p. 2.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 3.

⁹ I am using the words “esoteric” and “exoteric” here and elsewhere as reference to “insider/outsider” knowledge. “Esoteric” refers to aspects, language, etc. that is easily understood or recognized by those within the gaming world – usually participants but also researchers or other observers. “Exoteric” refers instead to knowledge that is recognizable even to those outside of the gaming world.

comparable to national divides). Players themselves recognize the social aspects of the game:

When I started, WoW was more of a social experience than gaming. I spent the bulk of my time chatting with people, and that was the reason I logged on everyday...

And theres [sic] more to it than levelling. You can do professions, gather pets, earning money, exploring, immersion, roleplay... And most important of all; friendship! Youll [sic] undoubtedly [sic] meet some people. Ive [sic] played WoW for many years and I have friends all over the globe.¹⁰

This is a member of the WoW community's response to someone who was trying to play the game without any real motivation, "just because". These ideas of social interaction online are not restricted to MMOs, WoW, or even to the game communities to which this article will eventually turn its attention: DotA and DotA 2. However, such online communities as these are clearly defined, esoteric, and somewhat homogenous in ways that, for example, social media sites (Facebook, Pinterest, etc.¹¹) are not.

While this paper is primarily occupied with the attempt to speak of a gaming community as a folk group, an obvious question remains: If folklore is a discipline ill-suited to the task of examining this group, what discipline would be more appropriate? The field of gaming studies is particularly apropos, but similar studies on gaming communities by scholars of games and gaming communities have been largely conducted by sociologists with an interest in gaming. While folklore studies must change and adapt to online life and the new facet such phenomena bring to a study of communities, gaming studies continues to develop as a field that is inherently interdisciplinary.

In general, ludology, the emergent term for the study of play, seems far more suited to the aspects of play than the communities themselves. According to Gonzalo Frasca, "A ludologist is somebody who wants to have a better understanding of games".¹² Notably, Frasca used this description when trying to differentiate ludology from narratology, implying that these two fields are similar and neither of them seem concerned specifically with the study of the players and their communities. While games such as

¹⁰ InZomnia365, "Re: I Don't 'get' WoW", WoW Subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/1p92a7/i_dont_get_wow/, date accessed 5 November 2015.

¹¹ Pinterest users, for example, don't form a community in the way that gaming groups do. Instead, Pinterest seems to be a place to declare to which communities a user belongs, including WoW and DotA.

¹² Quoted in Gamespot, "Redefining Games: How Academia Is Reshaping Games of the Future", <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/redefining-games-how-academia-is-reshaping-games-of-the-future/1100-6106009/>, date accessed 2 September 2017.

WoW allow players to create personas and interact in their community during gameplay, DotA and DotA 2 games are often very short. DotA players spend almost as much time out of game taking part in their community as in the game. This does not mean, however, that the gaming aspect does not matter to DotA players. Nor does it mean that this external component of community is exclusive to these communities. In his work on identity expressions in the gaming subculture, J. Patrick Williams has noted the way that items, understanding, and gaming history including success statistics all play a part in the identity of players of collectible card games such as *Magic: The Gathering*. He notes for these games what might be applied to the community-identity aspect of most if not all games: “Multiple, overlapping processes are involved in the construction of ‘authentic’ identities”.¹³ Such a statement highlights both the social complexity of these groups and the way in which the construction of such identity is not limited to in-game activity. Ludology’s focus on gameplay seems, therefore, to fall short of a comprehensive study on the DotA communities. Recent developments in gaming studies posit the game as a tri-part artefact of technology, individual activity, and social pastime. It is this final aspect with which this researcher is most concerned and which would be broadened by the use of folklore studies as a research apparatus.

Where relevant, the following examination of the DotA and DotA 2 communities has attempted to refer to gaming study articles and works that examine related aspects in other games and their communities. In general, even when the authors of these works primarily deal with digital studies, games, etc. they are dependent on these other disciplines for methodology and terminology. Furthermore, the myriad ways in which this case study examines aspects that are often divergent or oppositional between the DotA communities and similar ones in other studies conducted by scholars of games speak of the breadth and range necessary for broader attention to community studies in the still emerging discipline of game studies. The idea of a single discipline of gaming studies assumes qualities that are unique to games. However, the current status of gaming studies as an inherently interdisciplinary field both recognizes the unique qualities of games and allows them to be seen as a newer subsection of humanities and liberal arts studies, neither so different as to be unrelated nor so similar as to be subsumed by earlier works.

Below, the DotA communities will be examined through a folkloric lens, but like folk groups situated in the “real” world, the DotA communities are comprised of members who in turn populate myriad other groups. The influence of other folk groups is omnipresent: many gamers are a part of the WoW community or choose to participate

¹³ Williams J. Patrick, “Consumption and Authenticity in the Collectible Strategy Games Subculture”, in *Gaming as Culture*, ed. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (London: McFarland & Company) (2006), p. 89.

in DotA alongside real life friends with whom they form a different sort of community. Although this digital folklore exploration is far from a one-to-one comparison between online and “real life” folk groups, I’ve chosen to focus on creation stories and beliefs, community making, and “collectanea” within these online communities.

Although mediated by technology, such folkloric forms are recognizable as variations on their non-digital analogues. I’ve therefore conducted this research primarily through examination of various websites where players interact with each other. Some of these websites are forums and literal discussions while others are websites such as Wikipedia and DotA and DotA2 Wikipages. Such sites are often viewed as neither legitimate nor credible but are particularly useful here as they represent archives created by and for members of these communities. Also, email interviews have been conducted with a few members of the DotA 2 community. These members, while hardly representative of a large and thriving community, do allow for more personalized feedback than can be drawn from simply observing community activities.

Creation Myths: Dota Beginnings, IceFrog, and Game Deities

According to Sims and Stephens, belief is an important aspect in folk groups, indeed it is one of the ways that “cultural information is most often communicated within groups”.¹⁴ For many folk groups, “the question of belief is often most apparent in studying religious elements.”¹⁵ Some games include an in-game religion that players become pseudo practitioners of during gameplay. In her book-length study on an MMO called *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, Celia Pearce elaborates on some of the ways in which players of this game participate in a specific religion.¹⁶ While DotA and DotA 2 players do not participate in religious activities per se, they have long exhibited an interesting set of creation myths regarding the existence of the games. These creation myths, in conjunction with famous figures within the community, regularly lead to community members expressing their beliefs about the game in terms and phrases that mirror religious participation.

As the 2 in “DotA 2” implies, DotA 2 is the more recent of two games. DotA¹⁷, while strongly related to WoW, is not an MMO, but a MOBA, a multiplayer online battle

¹⁴ Sims and Stephens, p. 56.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 59.

¹⁶ See Pearce Celia, *Communities of Play*, (London: The MIT Press) (2009).

¹⁷ Although I will sometimes refer to it as “DotA 1”, the first game is rarely called as such, and is only done so anachronistically. Different companies control the two games. DotA 1 was never trademarked as a game and there was no intention of a sequel.

arena game in which teams compete for a specific goal or specific amount of time on a game map that is much more restricted in size than the world map of an MMO¹⁸. DotA is an acronym for Defense of the Ancients, a reference to the goal of the game. Two opposing teams of 5 players defend their “Ancient”, which isn’t specifically defined. An explanation can be extrapolated from in-game contexts and definitions of the word, such that it becomes a combination temple/tower/deity. Regardless of how the term is understood, these opposing Ancients figure in the game as attackable structures in opposite corners of the game map with a limited amount of “life”. Teams must attack and destroy several tiers of towers and eventually the Ancient of the opposing team while protecting their own towers and Ancient. The team whose Ancient falls first, loses the game.

DotA began as a kind of sub-game in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*,¹⁹ which included a world builder, where players could create custom scenarios. “These custom scenarios can be simple terrain changes, which play like normal Warcraft games, or they can be entirely new game scenarios with custom objectives, units, items, and events, like Defense of the Ancients”.²⁰ Because gameplay was located within the Warcraft game, original players were part of the Warcraft community. However, in 2013, the standalone sequel DotA 2 was released as a free-to-play MOBA by Valve Corporation, allowing gameplay for experienced DotA players as well as newcomers unfamiliar with Warcraft. Hero names, images, and other in-game terms were changed, but DotA 2 is easily recognizable as a “sequel to DotA”.²¹

¹⁸ Although DotA was not the first MOBA, it is often cited as one of the most influential. As a testament to its ubiquitous fame, you can reach the MOBA Wikipedia explanation page by following a link for “Dota (genre)” from the Dota Disambiguation page.

¹⁹ Although I feel as though “sub-game” is a sufficient explanation for the relationship between DotA and Warcraft, it is somewhat inaccurate. The Warcraft games are actually a series of several games that are related but not dependent on each other, and they comprise several different genres. Blizzard entertainment first began releasing Warcraft games in 1994. These were RTS (Real Time Strategy) Games, to which MOBAs are directly related, since gameplay involves strategizing against the opposing team. World of Warcraft was the fourth game in the series, and the first that is an MMO rather than an RTS game. DotA, meanwhile, debuted in 2003 (one year *before* 2004’s *World of Warcraft*) as a “mod” of *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*. These first 3 games, including DotA required a purchase of the game, but not of a subscription like that of WoW.

²⁰ “Defense of the Ancients”, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_of_the_Ancients, date accessed 11 December 2015.

²¹ For more information on the copyright agreements between Blizzard and Valve, see Curtis, “Blizzard and Valve settle ongoing 'Dota' trademark controversy”, Gamasutra, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/170248/Blizzard_and_Valve_settle_ongoing_Dota_trademark_controversy.php, date accessed 9 December 2015.

The DotA mod for Warcraft was originally created by an anonymous player named Eul in 2003, who soon disappeared from the scene, allowing for a series of other notable “modders” to step in and curate gameplay, heroes, and the map, including Guinsoo, Neichus, and IceFrog.²² Players were invited by IceFrog to comment on what changes they wanted made in the game, and IceFrog listened to these requests, reportedly changing a hero’s abilities less than two weeks after a newer version had been released because the community claimed that the hero was too powerful.²³ In 2009, it was announced that IceFrog would be working at Valve Corporation to develop a new game.²⁴ While community involvement in the creation of DotA 2 wasn’t as public as it had been in DotA, it was created by the same people who were controlling DotA.

Although anonymity isn’t a requirement of the DotA and DotA 2 communities, it does seem to be a mark of the creators to remain anonymous²⁵. This did not stop community members from speculating about IceFrog’s identity. A defamatory blog post by an alleged Valve employee identified IceFrog as Abdul Ismail was published in 2010 during the development of DotA 2.²⁶ Although Valve Corporation denied these rumours, a man named Ismail does appear to be a Valve employee, as his name appears in the credits of several Valve projects including their DotA 2 documentary *Free to Play*. DotA players’ devotion to IceFrog is apparent in the comments section of this blog post. Despite the claims that IceFrog/Ismail had previously worked for a rival game company, comments largely amounted to: “I don’t care as long as DotA 2 is good”. Meanwhile, commenters that leaned towards condemning IceFrog/Ismail professed a dislike for DotA players in general,²⁷ demonstrating a clear break between DotA community members’ adoration and the cynicism of non-members.

²² “Defense of the Ancients”

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ O'Connor Alice, "DotA Dev Joins Valve, Hints at Future Game", Shacknews, <http://www.shacknews.com/article/60733/dota-dev-joins-valve-hints>, date accessed 30 November 2015.

²⁵ Usually, but not always. For example, Guinsoo’s real name, Steve Feak, is publicly known.

²⁶ In May 2017, only a few months after the original research in this study, IceFrog’s identity was confirmed to be Ismail by the papers in a court case in California. Forum posts on reddit obscured Ismail’s name when announcing that the mystery was resolved, implying that some community members might prefer the belief and speculation to the truth. See pwnies, “Icefrog’s identity finally revealed in court documents”, DotA 2 Subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/6c1tp8/icefrogs_identity_finally_revealed_in_court/, date accessed 1 September 2017.

²⁷ As is common in online communities, many of these remarks included an impressive display of vulgar language and insults, but some of the milder insults referred to them as “dota fan boys”, implying weak-minded bias. For a more detailed look, see Anonymous, "The Truth About IceFrog: Behind the Bullshit", <http://icefrogtruth.blogspot.com>, date accessed 10 December 2015.

Another theory behind IceFrog's identity explored by those in the community includes the possibility of IceFrog's being Bruno Carlucci, a statistician, programmer, and DotA player and game commenter. Bruno's publicly available timeline doesn't match up very well with IceFrog's apparent one. IceFrog was announced to have been working with Valve from 2009, while Bruno announced in May 2014 that he'd "recently accepted a job at Valve as a Software Engineer".²⁸ Nevertheless, rumours that Bruno is IceFrog persist. Forums discussing the possibility cite age, astrological sign, tweeted pictures, and even an apparently shared love of mangoes as evidence for this. There are also several interviews in which co-workers of Bruno appear to ask him directly why he refused to make certain changes in DotA, implying that he indeed was the IceFrog controlling and editing the game according to player suggestions.

I've been referring to this quest to determine the identity of DotA and DotA 2 developers as a creation myth because the mystery surrounding the game's creation and players' interest therein mirrors the creation story questions posed by other societies. Most of the conversation and evidence surrounding these ideas are provided by community members who are active curators of official DotA history in avenues such as Wikipedia pages on DotA content and self-written DotA histories, such as that published on Facebook by professional DotA player Bu Yanjun "YaphetS", from China.²⁹

However, there are other strains of what will be termed "worship" and "belief systems" in the DotA communities. The aforementioned YaphetS is one of the players who has occasionally had "god" attached to the end of his name because of his "godlike" skill level. These DotA gods are described by a strange mixture of fan speculation and "official" information, often with mythic claims like "labeled by the Chinese".³⁰ In addition to the worship that seems to be inherent in labelling someone a god, players have been known to share items with other players they believe to be DotA gods or professional players.³¹ There is also talk of fraternization between the DotA gods and IceFrog. YaphetS's hero of choice in gameplay was Shadow Fiend, whose alternate

²⁸ "Bruno", Liquipedia Dota 2 Wiki, <http://wiki.teamliquid.net/dota2/Bruno>, date accessed 19 November 2015.

²⁹ YaphetS, "A History of Dota: Part 1", Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/yaphets-pis/a-history-of-dota-part-1/377203832338260/>, date accessed 22 November 2015.

³⁰ See Lapyex, "Dota Gods", JoinDOTA.com, <https://www.joindota.com/en/forums/691-joindota-and-community/693-community/197339-dota-gods&page=1>, date accessed 2 December 2015. and "YaphetS", Liquipedia Dota 2 Wiki, <http://wiki.teamliquid.net/dota2/YaphetS>, date accessed 22 November 2015.

³¹ Naut1g, "How Do the Devs and Community Feel about Players That Impersonate Pros on Steam?" Dota2 Dev Forums, <http://dev.dota2.com/archive/index.php/t-100430.html>, date accessed 10 December 2015.

name on DotA was “YaphetS”. This name was reputedly given “by IceFrog himself”, in tribute to this player.³²

Furthermore, DotA and DotA 2 players often “believe in the RNG gods and either their favour or disfavour”.³³ RNG stands for Random Number Generator (or, occasionally, RNG is Random Number Gods). As a game that relies on strategy and skill, there is still a certain amount of random “luck” involved in DotA. A number of heroes possess skills that randomly deal more damage than at other times, while a number of items will similarly randomly deal damage or randomly block attacks. The “disfavour” of the RNG gods is demonstrated by a random number that works in a player’s disfavour.

Interestingly, rhetoric surrounding IceFrog, the DotA gods, and the RNG gods, while usually clearly parodic, is often *religious* in nature, revealing if nothing else a tendency by DotA community members to explain DotA conventions in terms of belief. Players have created and posted parodies of the Lord’s Prayer as prayers to IceFrog and to the RNG³⁴. In one forum, a community member posed the question “Is IceFrog a god?” and responses to the post intentionally understood the question to be about IceFrog’s divinity rather than his playing ability. Responses include such assertions as “Eul is the Creator and IceFrog is the Savior”, and “IceFrog is a merciful god”.³⁵ The rhetoric surrounding the aforementioned DotA gods, meanwhile, seems mythic in nature as community members attempt to pass on the correct lore to new(er) players. “These titles were given during the DotA1 times”, one community member says, explaining the DotA gods to a self-professed new player asking about them on a forum.³⁶ These stories don’t always agree, and players are quick to defend their views using the same language. “Vigoss is the first god; they called him V-god because it sounded like Vigoss, and this is when he redefined how Dota was played. At least *this is the legend* I’ve heard...”³⁷

Game designer Aaron Oldenburg has demonstrated the potential for virtual games to “simulate religious faith” through procedural and emotional response-provoking elements. His exploration, however, limits itself to first person games. Not being a folklorist, Oldenburg’s interests do not extend to a gaming community’s creation of such faith. However, Oldenburg’s assertion that “religion and games often seem separate from the everyday world, as believers and players (by no means mutually

³² See just kiddings’ response to Lapyex, “Dota Gods”.

³³ Caboose, “DotA Interview”, email, received 29 November 2015.

³⁴ The RNG prayer was made by a member of the WoW community, referencing things outside of DotA gameplay.

³⁵ See Aircross’ and killer3254’s responses to Dotanewbe, “Is Icefrog a God”, PlayDota.com, <http://archive.playdota.com/threads/is-icefrog-a-god.1342407/>, date accessed 4 December 2015.

³⁶ See terryken’s response to Lapyex, “Dota Gods”.

³⁷ See Dusk562’s response to Lapyex, “Dota Gods”.

exclusive categories) choose to follow agreed upon sets of rules and narratives that distinguish them from non-believers and non-players” has a certain poignancy when applied to the DotA communities”.³⁸ Religion and gaming become inextricably linked as markers of community participation.

Community: Self-Regulation and Groups within Groups

An important aspect of community participation is ritual, which includes not only religious and coming-of-age rituals, but also initiation rituals. “Initiations involve activities that an individual initiate or group of initiates perform to prove their worthiness or to bond them to each other and/or to the group”.³⁹ Gaming communities have their own sets of rituals, including initiations. Through playing the game in his research of *Magic: The Gathering*, Williams discovered that before a player is able to play, he or she must construct a deck of cards, usually by buying a number of packs of cards from which players choose a combination to create a deck, which may or may not be strong depending on players’ skills and available cards. Although ready-to-play decks are available for purchase, Williams notes that players typically do not buy these decks,⁴⁰ indicating that the process of creating a deck – which demonstrates investment and understanding – is a sort of ritual for these players. Initiation and ritual in the DotA communities include such aspects as the structured act of downloading the game and completing the tutorial as well as the less rigidly defined period of time in which new players go from being hazed by experienced players to joining in the hazing of “newbs”.

DotA is a game created and regulated by the gamers who play it. Despite the way updates and changes were made to the game by apparent individuals like Eul or IceFrog, the changes were suggested by the community at large:

“Eul, Guinsoo or IceFrog alone did not make the map. The *DOTA* community...makes the map”, one player said. Loadscreen art is drawn by fans. Some bugs are found and some items and heroes are made, erased, and changed almost entirely because of community outreach.⁴¹

³⁸ Oldenburg Aaron, "Simulating Religious Faith", *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 3.1 (2011), pp. 51-52.

³⁹ Sims and Stephens, p. 119.

⁴⁰ Williams, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹ Walbridge Michael, "Analysis: Defense of the Ancients - An Underground Revolution", *Gamasutra*,

Community members are aware of their own power in this game-creation, and they extend this regulation to the moderation of the community itself.

With the release of DotA 2 as a free-to-play MOBA in 2013⁴², entrance into the DotA community became much less restricted for new players. Before this, it had technically been restricted only by purchase of the Warcraft III game. However, WCIII was notably the third game in a series of games with an already-tight community. DotA 2's easy availability removed the lingering traces of esotericism in terms of familiarity with the Warcraft games. However, the DotA and DotA 2 communities are self-regulating. Although the common stereotype of gamers such as these includes social awkwardness or inability to express themselves, these community members are incredibly prolific on forums, blogs, and YouTube. While access to the community is never officially denied, ignorance, lack of skill, or inability to learn from past mistakes is vehemently ridiculed and derided by the community. That DotA has a "steep learning curve" was attested to by three of the community members interviewed, all of whom confess to playing as many as six hours a week.⁴³

Because of the large number of heroes (each with their own set of abilities) that players can choose from, and the even wider selection of items that change the in-game situations, DotA and DotA 2 gameplay necessitates the ability to strategize; this requires a commitment to practicing as well as the inherent ability to mentally organize, calculate, and remember the items and heroes. Many players learn by watching public matches, watching YouTube videos, or reading Purge's guide to DotA, subtitled "Welcome to Dota, You Suck". Purge is a professional commentator and sometimes professional player.⁴⁴ The guide was originally written for DotA in 2011, before the public release of DotA 2 and it was updated for DotA 2 in 2012 and again this year. Purge's most recent version changes his opening line from "Welcome to DotA, you suck" to "Welcome to

https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/109814/Analysis_Defense_of_the_Ancients__An_Underground_Revolution.php, date accessed 11 December 2015.

⁴² DotA 2 was released for play in 2011 for professional players. TI1, the first international tournament for DotA 2 was held in Cologne, Germany in 2011. However, the game wasn't available to the public until 2013.

⁴³ According to emails from players Smith Matt, "DotA Interview", email, received 29 November 2015., Tucker Lavernius, "DotA Interview", email, received 29 November 2015., Tyler, "DotA Interview", email, received 29 November 2015., and Willjaf, "DotA Interview", email, received 29 November 2015.

⁴⁴ "Purge", Liquipedia Dota 2 Wiki, [http://wiki.teamliquid.net/dota2/Purge_\(Kevin_Godec\)](http://wiki.teamliquid.net/dota2/Purge_(Kevin_Godec)), date accessed 2 November 2015, and Godec Kevin "Purge", "Welcome to DotA, You Suck", PlayDota.com, <http://archive.playdota.com/threads/welcome-to-dota-you-suck.462907/>, date accessed 11 December 2015.

DotA, you su... well actually you guys have gotten a lot better".⁴⁵ This guide represents the starting point to even the minimal level of skill in DotA for many players. A number of blogs suggest this as a starting point, and this researcher has been personally told that reading this Guide is the best way to learn to play.

However, until the recent updates which thank players for "taking a chance on this game" that "takes a long time to refine your skills and learn", the guide read almost as a discouragement from entering the community.

You suck, and you are going to be constantly reminded of this fact for about 6-9 months (if you learn). If you read this guide and use your brain and be actively aware of how bad you suck, you can easily shave 3-6 months off of your complete noob status... You are going to feed. You are going to ruin games, and someone is going to be happy to tell you why.... You are going to have to have thick skin to play DotA.⁴⁶

Learning by playing can be similarly discouraging. In public matches, opposing teams will openly mock the losing team. Furthermore, many players talk about and practice "rage quitting", in which a particularly good opposing team or, more often, a particularly unskilled set of allies will lead to a player getting angry and leaving in the middle of a game. Interestingly, the community seems to regard these ostensibly destructive relationships as constructive criticism. DotA forums hold regular discussions on rage quitting, in which members show a mild amount of embarrassment after rage quitting while other players often console them with similar stories. Players sometimes describe these actions as necessary: "Someone on my team picked Necrophos, bought a ward and went to our ancient jungle camp. I knew what had to be done".⁴⁷ Such phrasing in these responses and even in the titles and original posts ("everyone has done it at least once in their gaming lifetime") posits these actions as intrinsic parts of playing DotA.⁴⁸

Such a hard-to-enter community, however, doesn't actually seem to discourage players. Instead, the high standards set by the community seem devoted to regulating the skill and care that goes into playing. Half-hearted community members are culled out, but

⁴⁵ Godec, Kevin "Purge", "Welcome to Dota, You Suck", Purge Gamers, <http://www.purgegamers.com/welcome-to-dota-you-suck/>, date accessed 6 December 2015.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Barachaos, "Re: Rage-quit: Tell Us Your Story", DotA 2 Subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/3ctg55/ragequit_tell_us_your_story/, date accessed 30 November 2015.

⁴⁸ masoomdon, "Rage-quit: Tell Us Your Story", DotA 2 Subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/3ctg55/ragequit_tell_us_your_story/, date accessed 30 November 2015.

even poor players who are committed to playing will be allowed to remain in the community.

Professional DotA players belong to teams, but regular public matches often loosely consist of teams as well⁴⁹. The five players interviewed all know each other in real life and sometimes, but not always, play together as a full team⁵⁰. One of them says that he began to play because “it had been getting a lot of press at the time due to The International 3 tournament going on” in 2013.⁵¹ The others all profess that they began playing because their friends were playing. With the exception of one of them, however, they all claim to play even with only one or two of their friends and often with “randoms”, players they don’t know.

These interviewees met in college, and DotA seems to have presented an opportunity for the friends to “stay connected”, though many of them have moved to distant states. Even when only three or four of them play, they regularly use a different program than the one provided by the DotA 2 game to audibly chat with each other. In addition to offering a hands-free chat mechanism, this separate program allows these friends to talk to each other without having to talk to any “randoms” that might be playing as their teammate. These friends usually opt instead to include the random teammates in strategies via typed messages.

Although members of the DotA communities at large, the interviewed players maintain a community within a community. They are each active within the community to varying degrees, often keeping up with the professional DotA circuit, online forums, and occasional public matches without their friends. However, they seem to largely view the DotA 2 community to which they belong as a virtual conduit that allows them to continue the community they established prior to playing together. “We have a private chat server, and a lot of times we talk about our lives, our jobs, and things that have nothing to do with Dota around the game or while we play”.⁵² Even when the players are physically together for visits, their conversations and activities are largely DotA-related. Sometimes, this group will play together while all in the same room, foregoing the virtual chat system to plot strategies and discuss the game aloud. Digital community for them has become a stand-in for a physical community, but apparently is no less realistic.

⁴⁹ “Teams” is perhaps a misleading term here. 2–5 friends can choose to play together, and any extra players needed to fill the 5 player slots will be filled with random players.

⁵⁰ There are several other members of this group whom I did not interview, but that sometimes join them in playing.

⁵¹ Smith Matt, “Dota Interview”

⁵² Tucker, “Dota Interview”

Collectanea: Digital Collectibles and Player Creations

Sims and Stephens have identified material culture as an important genre in folklore studies. For traditional studies, this material culture looks at permanent and ephemeral objects such as architecture or food, respectively. “Permanent or not, material culture has in common that it is tangible – can be touched, seen, eaten, or lived in”.⁵³ The study of a folk group’s material culture includes not only items produced by/within that community, but also items used by the community. These items acquire relevance and meaningfulness for folklorists through the method and purposes of their production as well as the occasion and frequency of their use.

Although there are a number of physical objects associated with the DotA games, such as T-shirts and figurines, there are also a number of digital items and activities that, while unrelated to actual gameplay, are very much a part of the DotA communities. Players can, for example, buy a \$35 hero set for a hero named Crystal Maiden which includes new clothes, new animations for her in-game abilities, and a wolf pup pet that follows her around during the game. These items are not necessary to gameplay in the way that some items are necessary for gaming, such as the cards in the collectible card games that Williams has examined.⁵⁴ Williams spends a significant amount of time elaborating on the capitalist aspect of such games. While it is possible to acquire a particularly strong card in a cheap pack of randomly assorted cards, it is much more common that strong cards are held by players who have invested more monetary capital into the game by buying more random packs and increasing the odds of getting a good card or by outright buying expensive cards from other players. DotA 2, however, is a free to play game and while some items are bought and paid for, they do not have the power to affect player or character skill or strength.

Perhaps the most popular digital content in DotA 2 is the Compendium. Each year, a new Compendium is released which gives players a number of in-game challenges that allow them to win prizes, many of which are available for purchase and some of which are specific to the Compendium. These special items are displayed during gameplay and players can see each other’s achievements. Although such items are not as unique, as the anime artist Trevor Blank examines in his chapter on digital collectors, his claim that such collectanea represent “a type of fetish in both an imaginative and a social sense” seems apt here as well. “Ownership”, Blank says, “means absolute possession of a specific, emotionally significant event in the narrative created by using the object. For this reason, possessing such an object invests the owners with equivalent social

⁵³ Sims and Stephens, p. 15.

⁵⁴ See Williams, “Consumption and Authenticity”

power among those sharing the same reverence for that narrative”.⁵⁵ Similarly, Pearce has spoken of the way that artefacts in the *Myst* games are often common to most or all iterations of the games, demonstrating the way that physical (or the digital version of digital) objects are an integral part of a community.⁵⁶ The acquiring and exchange of items and knowledge as well as original creations such as art or fictions that are based on DotA characters or experience in the DotA communities are likewise markers for community involvement and participation.

The sales from the Compendium fund one of the other main out-of-game activities that community members participate in: The International. The International (TI) is a tournament that happens every year, most recently in Seattle, WA. DotA 2 fans and players can travel to watch the tournament in Washington, or they can watch live online. In August 2015, the tournament was also broadcast live in a number of theatres both in America and in other countries, so that members of the DotA 2 community could watch the championship match live, even if they were unable to travel to the tournament. TI is truly an international tournament, demonstrating, as the small sub-community I’ve chosen to interview attempts to do, the way that this online community is unrestricted by distance. TI consists of Chinese teams, Korean Teams, Argentinean teams, and teams that are comprised of members from multiple nations, like Team Secret, which is located in “Europe”, but has players from Sweden, Canada, and Germany, for example.⁵⁷ TI watching is an interesting activity that imitates the gameplay between friends discussed above. DotA community members meet together and combine online activities with physically present social situations.

The DotA communities, furthermore, regularly create and share material that is relevant to the communities at large. DotA’s loading screens are community members’ fan art. Other community creations include guides such as Purge’s guide to the game as a whole and his other guides for individual heroes. Players, furthermore, have access to “builds” for each hero in-game. These builds function as minimalist guides, suggesting which abilities to prioritize and which items to buy during the game, but without the explanation and commentary of the longer guides that players often create. Builds can be rated by community members, helping other players to make informed decisions regarding which build they use.

Other community creations include YouTube videos of games and tactics. These can sometimes be used constructively for gameplay by members but can also be used for entertainment. During my interviews, several players claimed to have learned the game

⁵⁵ Blank, p. 167.

⁵⁶ See Pearce, pp. 158-167 and throughout.

⁵⁷ “Team Secret”, Liquipedia Dota 2 Wiki, http://wiki.teamliquid.net/dota2/Team_Secret, date accessed 9 December 2015.

by watching, but some of them specifically mentioned watching the “DotAWTF” YouTube videos, which are a series of videos highlighting particularly poor in-game choices by players.⁵⁸ The comments, like on the forums, are often extremely negative and/or harsh. There are more than 150 videos and the views and likes on the individual videos sometimes total more than 2,000,000 and 34,000, respectively.

There are, finally, community creations that have little to do with gameplay and more to do with creativity. Although not at all relevant to gameplay, each hero has a bio and story. During my interviews, it was revealed that the interview was for a folklore seminar, and the players were then asked if they had any ideas about how DotA 2 related to folklore. One of them pointed me to these hero profiles, which read like short fantasy summaries.⁵⁹ Another provided an internet link to an hour-long film created by a Chinese DotA player in 2011. Using scenes from the game, the player creates a story about Mirana, Magina, and TerrorBlade, wherein Mirana and Magina are in love. At the climactic end, TerrorBlade (Magina’s brother) kills Mirana. Instead of the common harsh criticism typical of the community, the film seems to be well received. The comments are overwhelmingly about how touching the movie is. Interestingly, the negative comments also seem to be caught up in the movie, as commentators flame the film character using the same language of in-game censure: “Use your ultimate [on] mirana [sic] and kill yourself noob uninstall dota”. Responses to such criticism, explanations like “He was too far to ult”, use in-game experience and logic to argue the point.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The DotA communities and their lore demonstrate the growing presence of online identities and an opportunity for an extended examination of how traditional folkloric practices are transposed to a virtual space. Although the virtual and physical activities occasionally intersect seamlessly, the digital has largely become the real for such communities. From their beliefs, to community boundaries, to creation, this lore is being distributed virtually to a group of gamers whose physical presence is as realistic as their virtual one.

⁵⁸ Tucker, “DotA Interview” and Caboose, “DotA Interview”.

⁵⁹ willjaf, “DotA Interview”.

⁶⁰ WoDota, “TerrorBlade's Revenge”, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr3lrxg-2mA>, date accessed 14 December 2015

As a field that focuses on the unique qualities of a community as well as the development and practice of these qualities, folklore seems an apt field for discussions of gaming communities. It's clear that even though these communities are formed and practiced online – their involvement and focus on games rather than more “traditional” activities like quilting (also a common focus for folklore studies) – gaming communities are not so radically different from traditionally recognized folk groups that a new terminology or methodology is necessary for examination.

As a competing field for the most suitable field by which to study gaming communities, gaming studies poses an interesting possibility. However, although frequently recognized as an independent field, game studies is not only made up of scholars from other fields, but it also often relies on long-established methods and terms used primarily in other disciplines. Perhaps folklore studies will eventually become one of the fields from which scholars enter gaming studies, as sociology, anthropology, and literature are now. Eventually its methodologies and vocabularies may become regular players in gaming studies works focusing on individual gaming communities. For this current project at least, folklore is a fitting field through which to examine the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of these particular communities. The way in which these methodologies prove successful in being applied to digital communities' comments upon the potential trajectory for further folkloric studies of digital communities, gaming-focused or otherwise.

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