

Respondent:

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Roundtable:

Playing with Capital, Capitalizing Play

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At the risk of generalizing a fantastically diverse group of people: we video gamers are a pragmatic bunch. This tends to be the case because so much of our gameplay is goal-oriented. Borrowing the old sports adage: we play to win. And when we can't win, we look for ways to improve our play so we might win the next time. We scrutinize detailed maps in game magazines. We share hints and codes with others on message boards. We strategize about team tactics before, during, and after our multiplayer matches. We comb through FAQs and walkthroughs to discover the location of hidden "Easter eggs" and exploitable glitches. And we deconstruct "speed run" videos to overcome difficult levels. In short: we gamers want to be better than we are, and we seek out a host of resources to become better players and self-actualized avatars.

Of course, game firms know that players are a resourceful lot, and they have designed free and paid utilities to assist us in our quest for self-improvement. Lately, one of the more popular techniques for delivering information and customizable control options to players has been the "companion app." These applications are appealing because they can be designed for a host of non-console devices (usually smart phones, tablets, and internet browsers) that players can (1) access when they are away from their gaming devices, or (2) use in conjunction with their primary screen while they are playing.

I'm injecting the companion app into our roundtable discussion on gaming capital because I believe it represents a crucial nexus point where the interests of gamers and entertainment firms intersect. Clearly, game publishers hope to leverage fandom across multiple screens to give their properties more traction in a competitive marketplace. These support apps signal that firms are invested in growing their user community, and developing additional revenue streams for current and future micro-transactions. Video gamers, on the other hand, look to these free and paid apps to gain a competitive edge against well-coded AI opponents and wily human competitors.

Game franchises have been utilizing a range of transmedia storytelling and world building strategies for decades. Yet most companion apps are not just another means by which publishers expand a game universe's backstory or lore. Rather, these applications focus on fostering transmedia play. Transmedia play differs critically from transmedia storytelling insofar as the former is concerned with the ways producers and consumers interact with the licensed property across new media devices. Transmedia play is thus less concerned with questions of content – i.e., whether a given property "makes sense" for a media format or platform (as is the case with transmedia storytelling) – than it is

with *how* users engage simultaneously *and* asynchronously with properties. Given the game industry's expertise with crafting and selling interactivity, it is not surprising that its major firms have been leaders in cultivating connected play opportunities across screens vis-à-vis their companion apps.

When a gamer traces their gameplay from a primary to a secondary screen (and back again), with the goal of discovering more about a game world or their play, it produces a potential wellspring of gaming capital for players and producers alike (although, to be clear, the nature of the capital produced may differ *considerably*). Gamers can learn more about play styles, tactics, strategies, characters, game mechanics, design choices; in short, more about what it takes to win, as well as the instrumental and non-instrumental knowledge valued by a community of players. Likewise, game publishers can learn more about their customers, including how they prefer to learn about their own gameplay and that of others.

What the case of the companion app illustrates, then, is that one way of defining gaming capital is to frame it broadly as a dynamic system of exchange between groups of gamers, groups of content producers, and exchanges between gamers and content producers. There are clear advantages to underscoring gaming capital's contingent dynamism. First, it signals that the concept is one that is perpetually in flux, representing relationships between varying constituencies. Second, it reminds media researchers that gamers engage in all manner of investigative practices using a vast array of paratextual fare. Moreover, thinking of gaming capital as a dynamic system highlights the need for studying gameplay and game design alongside user practices that happen before, during, and after moments of play. The increased use of second screens to inform primary screen gameplay forces deeper considerations of how gaming capital is produced as users jump between screens and interfaces, and between texts and paratexts.