

From Lurking to Participatory Spectatorship: Understanding Affordances of the *Dota 2* Noob Stream

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Abstract: From investigations in online learning and virtual communities, peripheral observation or “lurking” has been framed as an active process in which learners align themselves with the practices and discourses of a community. In this paper, we further develop the notion of lurking in informal computer-mediated contexts, focusing on competitive gaming communities, where games are marked for the steep learning curves and players demonstrate an extended commitment toward mastery. In this descriptive case study, we leverage new perspectives on routes to participation in order illustrate *participatory spectatorship* as integral in not only the act of becoming a player but also in learning the discourses and practices of a larger gaming enterprise.

Keywords: lurking, participatory spectatorship, participation

Introduction

The availability of online resources continues toward more open-source and collaborative spaces. As information and communication channels expand and reorganize, “lurkers” have received contradictory assessments of their validity as meaningful participants. Traditionally, lurkers are referred to as passive, participating as readers or observers but rarely – if ever – as active contributors (Edelmann, 2013). Nonetheless, lurkers make up the “silent majority” and account for the lion’s share of participants in online spaces (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). The negative connotation aimed at the vast majority of online participants has led to their re-evaluation. A more comprehensive interpretation of lurkers is as goal-oriented, active, and essential to well-balanced online communities. As Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on legitimate peripheral participation showed, observation on the margins of a learning community can be quite active. With this lens, we can view lurkers as new members of a community searching for established social norms and discursive practices, honing observation skills, and formulating the practices of a community (Lee et al., 2006). From this vantage point, lurking is a valid and practical avenue to negotiate access to a social community.

Lurking as a form of acceptable and worthwhile participation illustrates the need to understand online interaction as a multidimensional and multimodal set of behaviors, purposes, and practices. The prevalence of this phenomenon in online forums is only a small sample of potential routes to full participation in a social space. We have recently seen the rise of the “eSport” in digital gaming communities as worthy of deeper investigation. While competitive games and even professional gaming (Taylor, 2012) have been a staple of the digital gaming world for some time now (e.g., *Quake*, *StarCraft*), the emergence of the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) and the related rise of streaming services (e.g., Twitch.tv, YouTube) have introduced these games to millions of new players.

In games and learning research to date, many have focused on the individual’s immersion in a game as a model for learning. Scholars have argued that games incorporate sound learning principles and can be used to understand and enhance learning (Gee, 2007; Squire, 2011; Steinkuehler, Squire, & Barab, 2012). This perspective often focuses heavily on engagement through *play* as a means for learning by doing, acting as a vehicle to engage players in problem-solving and consequential decision-making. And yet, with a focus on the informal learning contexts of games, we find that the *players’* perspective is often just as integral to learning in the larger space of computer-mediated activity.

Participatory spectatorship

Participation in competitive games is highly specialized and demanding. Relevant membership within competitive gaming communities requires an understanding of complicated and nuanced discourse, expert execution of play, and high-level strategic understanding. This leads us to the question: Why do players continue to persevere and pursue expertise despite a harsh learning curve and competitive atmosphere? We posit that one factor is engagement with streaming and eSports. We seek to characterize the tools that mediate enculturation in these communities by looking deeply at the structures within eSports.

While the term “participatory spectatorship” has a history in games, theatre, and invasion sports (Douglas, 2002; Jensen, 2011; Ludvigsen & Veerasawmy, 2010) in this study we characterize it as *the active observation of a sport or spectacle in the pursuit knowledge though without requiring a recognized information need*. Traditionally, lurking describes peripheral membership as “readers” but not “writers.” Here, the act of “watching” functions as an often overlooked element of participation and may simultaneously serve as entertainment, a means of social engagement, as well as provide opportunities for learning the game and community’s discourses.

Discourse analysis

As the primary aim of this study is to understand how a curated process of participatory spectatorship shapes how learners use computer mediated-information channels, we present here a descriptive case study (Stake, 1995) of an eSports stream and provide a discourse analysis of a specific exchange during a live broadcast of a tournament.

For this case, we focus on the *The International’s Newcomer’s Stream* for the eSport game *Dota 2*. *The International 4’s Newcomer’s Stream*, informally referred to as the “noob stream” (located at http://www.twitch.tv/dota2ti_noob), caters to brand new and relatively inexperienced players with the explicit educative intent (e.g., teaching the mechanics of the game, strategies, and discourse of *Dota 2* and eSports). At the time of our sampling, the noob stream channel had been viewed over 1.6 million times. For novice players, *Dota 2* is quite difficult to follow. Watching with the support of a *Newcomer’s Stream* offers newcomers a basic description of game mechanics and a subtle introduction to the depth of eSports, serving to teach as well as introduce new players to *Dota 2* to its participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

We conducted an exploratory Discourse analysis (Gee, 2013) on a sample from game two of *The International 4 Grand Finals*. Of particular interest is an exchange between two noob stream announcers “A” and “B,” who utilize the space as a means to overtly instruct new players as to salient elements of the game. In the following analysis, we took several seconds of interaction between the two announcers, transcribed the discussion, and reframed it in Stanza form for analysis.

Stanza 1: Explanation of Actions

- 1(A): NewBee has smoked up,
- 2(A): meaning they’re invisible to the minimap
- 3(A): and to the wards and whatnot.
- 4(A): They are doing this to get a little bit of movement speed at the beginning of the game
- 5(A): and to place wards.
- 6(A): Wards.

Stanza 2: Elaboration

- 1(B): And not just that --
- 2(B): Come on, it’s about trying to get kills.
- 3(A): Of course, yeah --

Stanza 3: Reframing as Strategy

- 1(B): They are trying to find the enemy heroes,
- 2(B): because if you kill somebody right at the...
- 3(B): the first person that dies gives an extra reward, basically.
- 4(B): Its called first blood and
- 5(B): they give away an extra 200 gold.

Stanza 4: Evaluation of Strategy

- 1(B): So, using a smoke here is usually a little dangerous
- 2(B): because it means that their supports are less likely to roam later.
- 3(B): So, they were really hoping to get a kill there

4(B): and they didn't.

Stanza 5: Prediction of Future Play

1(B): So, that means that they are probably not planning to be very roamy this game.

2(B): The only hero that's going to move around is probably going to be the Earthshaker.

3(B): The Ancient Apparition played by SanSheng, or Banana, sorry,

4(B): is mostly going to sit up here and

5(B): cover his safe lane carry.

Stanza 6: Back to Original Framing

1(A): Indeed, let's go over here and

2(A): just go over wards if you don't mind.

3(B): Okay.

In Stanza 1, "Announcer A" described the game first at a *technical level*, focusing on the components and mechanics of the game. This emphasis carried through the theme of Stanza 1. Players' explicit actions were presented through the use of technical terms: "smoked up" and "wards." This represents both game specific lexicon and discourse practices. Announcer A made unambiguous what spectators were observing but may not have fully understood. "Wards" are considered structural components of *Dota 2*, and their reiteration in lines 3, 5, and 6 demonstrates Announcer A's position as to the depth of knowledge appropriate for the noob stream.

In Stanza 2, "Announcer B" stepped in and elaborated on the previous observations. This sets up a shift in the framing of the gameplay from one in which the announcer valued components and mechanics to one where practices and *goals* ("trying to get kills") became important. This negotiation characterized the dialectical relationship and developing tension between Announcer A and Announcer B. Stanza 3 reframed the discussion as about *strategy*, and Announcer B's strategic explanation was an extension of what was explicitly observed, building off of Stanza 1's reflection of the spectator's perspective with additional definitions of in-game content. In all, Stanza 3 moved beyond what is "observed" to strategic discussion.

In Stanza 4, Announcer B further developed an *evaluation* of the strategic merits of the actions described in Stanza 1. Line 1 assessed the risk of using "smoke" at this stage of the game. This evaluation of decision-making was relevant, as team NewBee did not attain the hypothetical goal proposed by Announcer B (see Stanza 4, Line 4). Line 2 indicated a long-term strategic ramification of the actions described in Stanza 1: NewBee had lost ability to "roam" while aided by "smoke" to elude the vision of "wards." Announcer B moved beyond structures and components of "smoke" and "wards" and developed strategic *hypotheticals*.

And so, expanding on these hypotheticals, Stanza 5 elaborated *predictions*. The early "smoke" signals a premeditated strategy to be less "roamy" this game. Line 2 shifted the framework from team level strategy to the approaches of individual players. According to Announcer B, the player-controlled hero "Earthshaker" will likely be the only "roamer." This hypothetical is based on team-level decision-making, the actions (Stanza 1), the ramifications of actions (Stanza 2 and Stanza 3), and observable outcomes (Stanza 3). Line 3 attached cultural significance to "Ancient Apparition" by noting the professional player who is controlling the hero. Moreover, Line 4 and Line 5 continue to process of generating hypotheticals based on situational awareness.

Finally, in Stanza 6, Announcer A prompted a *return* to the description of the observable components and mechanics of "wards." This full-circle approach is perhaps representative of a larger model of participatory spectatorship practices: observable components and mechanics leading to hypotheticals and strategy followed by a return to observable components and mechanics.

Overall, it seems that participatory spectatorship may provide learners opportunities to assume the *identities and roles* of professional players (Stanza 5, Line B), *embody their actions* (Stanzas 1-3), and understand their *decision-making* (Stanzas 4-5). Moreover, this form of participation hones observation of basic activities and components of a functional game system, as well as the rules and ritual of competitive gaming communities. Participatory spectatorship takes the form of embodied problem-solving narratives, wherein players may develop and analyze hypothetical situations based in observation of play (Stanza 5).

Conclusions and implications

We provide here a provisional analysis of the affordances of the *Dota 2* noob stream, as a means of illustrating the ways that participatory spectatorship may be consequential for enculturation into these informal learning

communities and for the collaborative play found within them. Though this is but one verbal exchange within a larger set of announcer conversations, and atop a multimodal and highly interactive game space itself, the discussions here seem to reveal patterns within the conversations that occur in these spaces. That is, spectating the noob stream is not a “simple” viewing of game activity, but is a complex process in which learners interpret the announcers’ interpretations of play, reinterpret this as strategy, and model the prediction of play activity. Spectatorship becomes participatory as observations and interpretations are added to knowledge and later embodied in practice. The predictions of play in Stanza 5 are features of a computer-mediated negotiation between announcers and spectators that may serve to coordinate and guide continued participation.

As we saw in Stanza 1 and Stanza 6, the degree to which “wards” are emphasized develops a tension between the announcers. The dialectic between announcers on the noob stream may afford spectators an opportunity to negotiate and interpret a variety of approaches to understanding the game as player. The lack of a required information need in participatory spectatorship gives viewers the opportunity to actively transform knowledge. Information presented by the announcers is constrained by the actions in the game; however, these constraints also allow for the spectrum of information complexity present in Stanzas 1-6. As lurkers gather discursive tools and the social capital that comes from them, they may work their way toward visible participation within an online community. Similarly, participatory spectatorship can afford enculturation and knowledge construction embedded within a social community. Yet, as games are embodied forms of play, participatory spectatorship may also afford a sense of physical participation in a performance or hypothetical scenario. The present study does not investigate how spectators engage with live streams, nor does it interpret all the possible forms of participation surrounding *Dota 2* as an eSport. It is only the first step in understanding how participatory spectatorship serves participants as they move toward more central membership in a larger gaming enterprise, and will serve as a basis for future work.

This descriptive case study is a way to re-engage with lurking from a new direction by injecting forms of spectatorship that may afford different kinds of participation from those studied in online text-based communities. The expansion of lurking into multimodal spaces opens perspectives to a variety of forms of sociodramatic and pretend play. The lens of participatory spectatorship presents players with opportunities for learning in complex media spaces involving a widely interconnected set of resources and the exemplification of discourse practices that extend beyond the game itself. With the goal of teaching novice players a complex game, the noob stream hones the observation of components and strategy, a level of perception that in other circumstances may require hundreds of hours of practical experience. As participatory spectatorship, play is modeled in real-time and in real-world (albeit digital) situations, allowing players to observe and later enact skills and practice in the form of play. This reinforces that participatory spectatorship, like lurking, is an *active* process of enculturation into complex media spaces.

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